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FANTASY FICTION

JUNE, 1953

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A N E D I T O R I A L O N A COMEDY OF TERRORS

"How," asked the sweet young thing, "can you people think there is anything funny about such *terrible* things?" She shuddered delicately at the picture of the werewolf's victim and wandered off to join the rest of the crowd, and was soon giggling happily over the way Waycroft had taken to beating his wife after a night with the boys.

Well, in a way, she was right. Most of the things that interest fantasy readers are terrible—historically. Men can laugh now, but the creatures appearing in stories as demons and pixies were once devils of savage malice and imps of horrible perversity. They are the ancient terrors that beset the night. And the minute we stop taking them seriously, we've done two things: we've grown up beyond our cave-dweller heritage and we've turned back to a world of make-believe that requires the flexibility usually reserved for children.

We're not just laughing, though. The terrors can still be things to frighten the pants off us—but only for the moment, while we play the game of just suppose. We're using the light touch, even when we go in for a bit of sheer, sustained horror.

In the sense that the light plays of the Greeks were called comedies—as opposed to the dark tragedies—and the beings of the night are still terrors to most people, we are dealing with a comedy of terrors. And that is probably the closest we've come yet to a definition of the purpose of these stories.

All of which means nothing. We still don't care for definitions, so long as the function is plain. And that function, of course, is to add a little zip to living and a bit of spice to our enjoyment of this life by stepping outside where the rules are a bit changed.

It's an intellectual game, naturally. And it requires considerable hard, intense thinking on the part of the authors who provide this fun. Anybody can tell a ghost story. The whole vein of our tradition is loaded with grim tales of ghosts, werewolves, vampires and demons. But there's no fun in rehashing all those old stories, nor even in simply lampooning them in an attempt to be funny. They have to be examined logically, and then put into a present-day setting in some way that makes them fit. The results can be humorous; the ghost can be that of a man who never believed in ghosts, and is trying to prove now that he doesn't exist, with a twist of some kind that makes for

out-and-out comedy. Or it can be horror of a twisted outlook on life that just *might* be real, after all; maybe there are things in the night—and maybe you're one of those things. You don't know it—but are you sure? Remember when you woke up from a good night's sleep more tired than when you lay down? Remember when you were in that place you'd never seen before, and suddenly remembered it?

But it has to be logical, within its own frame of reference. A werewolf or a vampire is not normally a very logical thing to find in our current environment. Vampires won't find cemeteries handy now, and the night hours when they must court their prey are full of all sorts of business now.

But don't forget that such beings were adaptable. Wolves may be lacking today, and dogs don't run wild much. But the coyote has been able to flourish in many parts of the country. The werewolf who could adapt to bullets—other than silver ones—may have changed form a bit. Or the vampire may have discovered dark glasses and come out in the light of day.

In fact, maybe the vampire is being freed from some of his troubles. Suppose it was *he*, and not only his victim, who was anemic—which was why he needed all that blood. Maybe there was a vitamin deficiency behind it all. If he could cure that now—and still have his undead state—the vampire might be taking over the world, no longer limited by the results of his terrible hunger.

Has anyone checked to see whether there are more people born with the "universal" blood-type? That's what a vampire would need, of course, considering that he could never check up on types before his transfusions. There's no reason why an ordinary man needs such universal blood, but a vampire would.

Our comedy of terrors requires a light touch—but one which goes into more logical extrapolation of the past into the present than might be thought. The old Gothic horror story is out—because it is dull. But given some good reasons and a few twists to make it consistent with present-day facts . . . well, why not?

Fantasy is a pretty unlimited subject—subject to severe limitations of its own logic. I suspect that unlike the sweet young thing, we aren't laughing at those terrible things, but are simply appreciating a good game of such logic, well-played. And I also wonder if our comedy of terrors isn't a lot better than the average man's daily life, with its eternal tragedy of errors!

LESTER DEL REY

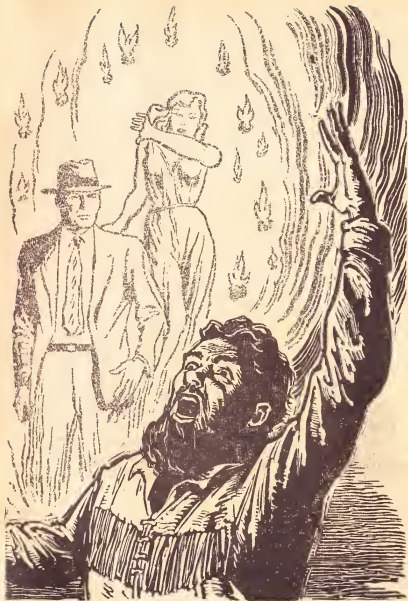
THE WALL OF SERPENTS

BY L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP
AND FLETCHER PRATT

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

Harold Shea had a certain facility for magic, even though he did insist on playing by ear. The trouble with Finnish magic, however, was that it had to be sung. And Shea never was able to carry a tune!





The mail was neatly stacked on the table in the front hall. Mrs. Belphebe Shea (originally of Faerie) said:

"Mrs. Dambrot is having cock-tails on the fifteenth. That's Thursday, isn't it? And here's a note from the maid, poor abject. The Morrisons are having a lawn-party Sunday and want us to come. This one's really for you; it's from that McCarthy wittold who was in your class last semester, and he wants to know when he can call on us and talk about dia—dianetics."

"Oh, that," said Harold Shea. He pushed back his black hair and stroked his long nose. To an explorer of alternative space-time continua these proposals were all somewhat less than fascinating.

"And will we subscribe five dollars to the Guild for—"

"Hell," said Shea.

She cocked her head on one side, eyeing him from under arched brows. He thought how pretty she was and how quickly she had adapted to his own continuum since he had brought her from the universe of the *Faerie Queene* and later rescued her from that of the *Orlando Furioso*, whither his collaborator Chalmers had accidentally snatched her while angling for Shea to help him out of a private predicament.*

"My most sweet lord," she said, "I do protest you want in courtesy. When you cozened me to wed with you, 'twas with fair promise that my life would be a very paradise."

He slipped an arm around her and kissed her before she could dodge. "Life anywhere with you would be a paradise. But lawn parties! And the home for homeless poodles, five dollars!"

Belphebe laughed. "The Morrisons are gentle folk. There will be lemonade and little sandwiches. And we shall probably play charades afterward, 'stead of being pursued by barbarous Moors."

Shea seized her by both shoulders and looked intently at the expression of wide-eyed innocence she had assumed. "If I did not know you better, kid, I'd say you were trying to persuade me to get out of it somehow, but getting me to make the proposition. Just like a woman."

"My most dear lord! I am but a dutiful wife, that loves to do her husband's will."

"When it's the same as your own, you mean. All right. Ohio bores you. But you don't want to go back to Castle Carena and that gang of tin-plated thugs, do you? We never did find out who

*See *The Incomplete Enchanter* (Prime Press, 1950) and *The Castle of Iron* (Gnome Press, 1950) by the present authors.

won the magical duel, Astolph or that ganef Atlantès."

"Not I. But come, sir, let us reason together on this." She led the way into the living-room and sat down. "In serious sooth, though we be but newly returned and though this Ohio be a smiling land of peace and good order, I think we too lightly promised each other to wander no more."

"You mean," said Shea, "that you can take only so much peace and good order at a time? Can't say I blame you. Doc Chalmers used to tell me I should have taken to politics or become a soldier of fortune instead of a psychologist, and damned if—"

"'Tis not solely that whereon I think," she said. "Have you any word further on our friends who were lately with us?"

"I haven't checked today, but none of them had come back yesterday."

Shea looked worried. In the course of their incursion into the continuum of Ariosto's Orlandian epics they had left no less than four colleagues and innocent bystanders scattered about sundry universes. Shea was torn between a yearning for a stretch of sweet domesticity on one hand, and his natural restlessness and sense of duty towards his stranded acquaintances on the other. But he knew that domesticity and dynasty-founding

would have to wait until the other matter had been cleared up.

"That would be a week complete since our return," said Belphebe.

"Yes. Don't know that I blame Doc Chalmers and Vaclav Polacek for staying in the world of the *Orlando Furioso*; they were having such a good time there. But Walter Bayard and Pete the cop were stuck in Coleridge's Xanadu the last I know, and they weren't enjoying it one little bit. Doc was supposed to send them back here directly from Xanadu, and he either couldn't make it or forgot."

"And there are those who'd take it amiss if they came not? Even as you've told me that the police sought you out when I was missing in the land of Castle Carena?"

"I'll say so. Especially since one of them is a cop. In this land of peace and good order it's a lot more dangerous to monkey with a policeman than with a professor."

She looked down and moved one hand on the edge of the couch. "I feared as much . . . Harold!"

"What's the matter, kid?"

"There's a kind of knowledge woodlings have that those in cities do not know. When I went abroad today I was followed both

here and there without once being able to see by whom or for what purpose."

Shea leaped up. "Why, the dirty skunks! I'll—"

"No, Harold. Be not so fiery-fierce. Could you not go to these cops and tell them the simple truth?"

"They wouldn't believe it any more than they did the last time, when they thought I'd bumped you off. And if they did, it might start a mass migration to other space-time continua. No, thanks! Even Doc Chalmers hasn't worked out all the rules of transfer yet, and the whole business might turn out to be as dangerous as selling atomic bombs in department stores."

Belphebe cupped her chin in one hand. "Aye. I do recall how we were ejected from my own dear land of Faerie, never to return, despite your symbolic logic that changes all impressions the senses do receive. Yet I like the present prospect but little."

She referred to Shea's final desperate spell in his conflict with the wizard Dolon in the Spenserian continuum. Dolon had been destroyed, but Shea had worked up such a high magical potential that he had been thrown back into his own universe, dragging Belphebe with him. Shea barked a laugh.

"Just think how much less

Bayard and Pete the cop like it. They're still in that marble madhouse, listening to Oriental swing music and eating milk and honey. And since the poem was never finished, they just keep getting one round of it after another."

Reed Chalmers's effort to fetch Shea from his own universe to Castle Carena had landed Shea, Polacek, Bayard, and Pete in Xanadu, and a second attempt had succeeded with Shea and Polacek only.

Belphebe sent him a level gaze. "Then don't you conceive it somewhat your duty, my lord, to release them from this durance? Should a good knight let peril stay him from a doughty deed?"

"You know where to plant the needle in me, don't you? It's apt to be dangerous at that, though. Neither Bayard nor Pete has enough imagination to adapt himself to the necessary changes in received impressions, probably. Especially in such a place as Xanadu, where the poetic element of the magic is so very strong. And if Chalmers can't get them out I'm not sure I can. You'll have to stay behind; I won't take a chance with you."

"Therefore leave me caught in the toils of your police whilst you disport yourself amongst the houris of Xanadu! Nay, never,

Sir Harold! 'Tis both of us or neither."

"Listen, kid. Honest—"

She stood up and stamped a foot that was quite small for so tall a girl. "Both or neither, I say, sir! Come, I've seen enough of your art to try it for myself if you'll not take me. I may not come to where you are, but at least I shall be free of this world of lawn-parties."

"Listen, it's going to be awfully difficult, and I don't know whether even I have enough magic."

Belphebe's brows rose. "Never before have I known you so lacking in resource. Or is it that you do not wish to go? Hark!—be there not some frame of thought, some world to which we could remove and find a magic strong enough to overpower this of Xanadu? Thus we might outflank our trouble rather than essaying to beat it down by assault direct."

She noticed that she was assuming the question of whether she should accompany him to be settled, but he had now been married long enough to know better than to make an issue of it. He said:

"It's an idea, anyway. Hmm, maybe Arthurian Britain. No; all the magicians there are bad eggs except Bleys and Merlin. Bleys is pretty feeble and Merlin

we couldn't be sure of finding since he spends a lot of time in our own continuum." (Merlin had in fact put in an appearance in the final scene of the Orlandian adventure.) "The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* haven't any professionals except Circe, and she was a pretty tough baby, not likely to help us. There aren't any magicians to speak of in *Siegfried* or *Beowulf* . . . Wait a minute, I think I've got it. The *Kalevala!*"

"And what might that be?"

"The Finnish epic. Practically all the big-shots in it are magicians and poets too. Väinämöinen* could be a big help — 'Väinämöinen, old and steadfast . . .' with a heart the size of a balloon. But we'll need some equipment if we go there. I'll want a sword, and you'd better take a knife and a good bow. The party might get rough."

Belphebe glowed. "That lovely bow of the alloy of magnesium, with the sight, that lately I used in the contest for the championship of Ohio?"

"N-no, I think not. It probably wouldn't work in the Finnish frame of reference. Might turn brittle and snap or something. Better use the old wooden one. And wooden arrows, too. None of

*If you don't know how to pronounce all those umlauts, Van-am-main-en comes fairly close to it. And *Kalevala* is Kah-lev-uh-lah.

those machine-age steel things you're so crazy about."

She said: "If this Finland be where I think, will it not be uncomfortable cold?"

"You bet. None of that perpetual summer you had in Faerie. I've got enough backwoods clothes to do me, and I'll make out a list for you. Let's see, this sounds like a breeches-and-boots expedition."

"What kind of country would it be?"

"Near as I can make out, it's one vast sub-arctic swamp. A flat land covered by dense forest, with little lakes everywhere."

"Then," she said, "boots of rubber would serve us well."

Shea shook his head. "Nothing doing. For the same reason that you shouldn't take that trick magnesium bow. No rubber in this mental pattern. I made that mistake among the Norse gods and nearly got my ears beaten off for it."

"But—"

"Listen, take my word for it. Leather boots, laced and well greased. Wool shirts, leather jackets, gloves—you'd better get a pair of those mittens that leave one finger free. After we get there, we can get some native clothes. Here's the list—oh, yes, woolen underwear. And drive slow, see?"

He looked at her as sternly

as he could manage; Belphebe had a tendency to drive the Shea Chevrolet as though she were piloting a jet fighter.

"Oh, I'll be a very model of prudence." She shifted from foot to foot.

"And while you're gone," he continued, "I'll get out the symbol-cards and grease up our syllogismobile."

When Belphebe returned two hours later, Harold Shea was squatting cross-legged on his living-room floor with the cards laid out in front of him. They looked like the Rhine ESP cards, except that the symbols were the little horseshoes and cruces ansatae of symbolic logic. He had ordered these cards on the Garaden Institute's money when he brought Belphebe from Faerie into his own continuum, and they were ready on his return from the *Orlando Furioso*. They ought to make the task of leaping from one universe to another considerably easier than by drawing the symbols on blank cards or sheets of paper. Beside him lay a copy of the *Kalevala*, to which he referred from time to time as he tried to sort out the logical premises of the continuum for proper arrangement of the cards.

"'Lo, sweetheart," he said abstractedly, as she came in with the big bundle in her arms. "I

think I've got this thing selective enough to drop us right into Väinämöinen's front yard."

"Harold!"

"Huh?"

"The slot-hounds are surely on the trail. Two men in a police-car sought to follow me on my way home."

"Oh-oh. What happened?"

"I spun sprackly-wise about a few corners and so eluded them for the time, but—"

"Oh, boy! They'll have your license number and be here any time."

"A pox and a murrain on them! What is there more to assemble? I'll have all ready in half an hour's space."

"Not half an hour. Now. Stay there! No, don't try to put on those new clothes now. Hug the bundle and it'll come along with us. Get your bow and stuff."

He jumped up and ran up the stairs. Presently his voice came, muffled from the depths of a closet. "Belphebe!"

"Yes?"

"Where the hell are those thick wool socks of mine?"

"In the big carton. You haven't used them since last winter."

"Okay . . . And that yellow scarf? Never mind, I found it . . ."

Minutes later he reappeared in the living-room with his arms

full of clothing and equipment. To Belphebe he said: "Got your bow? Good. And plenty of arr—"

The front doorbell rang.

Belphebe took a quick look out the window. "Tis' they! There squats their car! What's to do?"

"Beat it for the *Kalevala*, quick. Sit on the rug beside me and hold my hand with one hand and your duffle with the other."

The bell rang again. Shea, throwing himself into the lotus posture of Yoga, concentrated on the cards in front of him.

"If A is not not-B, and B is not not-A . . ."

The room went out of focus.

There was nothing in front of him save the cards, arranged in a square of five cards on a side. Twenty-five cards.

". . . and if C be the Land of Heroes, the *Kalevala* . . ."

On went the spell. The cards dissolved into a million little spots of light, whirling in a rigadon of their own mysterious meaning. Shea tightened his grip on Belphebe's hand and his bundle of gear.

There was a sensation of being borne, feather-light, along the avenues of a gale. Colors, Sounds that could not quite be heard. A feeling of falling. Shea remembered how he had been scared witless the first time this happened to him—and how at the end of it he had landed in Norse

myth at the Ragnarok instead of the Irish myth h  had desired . . .

The whirling lights sorted themselves out into a fixed pattern, solidified, materialized. He was sitting in long, worn grass, with Belphebe and a couple of piles of clothes beside him.

II

The grasses, nodding to a gentle breeze, closed in the view around them. Overhead a blanket of close-packed low cloud marched across Shea's vision, shutting off the sky. The air was mildly cool and moist. At least they had not arrived in the midst of one of those terrifying Finnish winters.

Shea gathered his long legs under him and rose with a grunt, pulling Belphebe up after him. Now he could see that they stood in a wide meadow. To their right the meadow ran out into the edge of a forest of mixed birch and fir. To the left—

"Hey, kid! Look at those," said Shea.

Those were a group of animals grazing around a big old oak that stood by itself in the meadow. Shea made out three horses, rather small and shaggy, and another animal, belonging to the deer family. With antlers. Either a caribou or a very large reindeer.

"We shall not lack for meat," said Belphebe. "Certainly this is a noble stag, and too proud to fear."

The four animals, after a ruminant look at the time-continuum travelers, had returned to their grazing.

"It must be a reindeer," said Shea. "They use them for draft-animals around here."

"Like the gift-giving sprite called Santa Claus in your legends of Ohio?"

"Yeah. Let's get our junk over to that fence and put our wood-clothes on. Damn, I forgot tooth-brushes. And extra underwear . . ."

He thought of other items he'd forgotten in their haste to get away, such as grease for their boots. However, there were two of them, they had his well-tempered ep e and her longbow, not to mention his command of magic. By the use of these in such an environment, it should be possible to get whatever else was really necessary. Like that bird Hybrias, the Greek or Cre-tan or whatever he was, who composed the arrogant little song:

"I have great wealth, a sword,
a spear,
And a trusty shield beside me
here;

With these I plow, and from
the vine
Squeeze out the heart-
delighting wine—”

Shea made a mental note of that song. If he could think out the proper magical passes to go with it, it might come in handy as a spell when the going got rough.

The fence was one of the wood-rail, Abraham Lincoln type. As they neared it, picking up their feet to force them through the long grass, the forest opened out a bit, and Shea glimpsed a group of low, long houses, half hidden among the trees, with a thin blue plume of smoke coming out of a hole in the roof of one. There was a faint sound of voices.

“People,” said Shea.

“Grant they may be friendly,” said Belphebe, glancing toward the buildings as she inserted herself into an angle of the fence and began to pull her dress over her head.

“Don’t worry, kid,” said Shea. “Väinämöinen’s the best egg in this whole space time continuum.”

He began to change to his woods-clothes.

“Oh, Harold,” said Belphebe. “We brought with us no scrip or other carrier wherein to transport our possessions, and I am loath to leave this good dress.

It was the first you bought me, when we were in New York.”

“Fold it up, and I’ll make a bag out of my shirt. Hello, company’s coming!”

They hurriedly completed their change and were lacing their boots when the man who had appeared from the direction of the houses reached the gate in the fence and came toward them.

He was a short man, of about Harold Shea’s own age (in other words, on the naive side of thirty), with a snub nose; wide Mongoloid cheek-bones and a short, straggly black beard. His thumbs were thrust into a broad embroidered leather belt that gathered in a linen blouse-shirt which fell over a pair of baggy woolen pants, which in turn were tucked into boots with hair on the outside. A cap of some high-grade fur sat precariously on one side of his head. He swaggered notably.

Shea buckled on the scabbarded épée and said: “Good day, sir!” confident in his knowledge that his transition to this continuum had automatically changed his language to the local one.

The man cocked his head on one side and combed his beard with his fingers, surveying them from head to foot. Finally he spoke:

"Oh, you funny-looking strangers,
It is plain for all to witness,
You are from a foreign country!

Tell me of yourselves, O strangers;

Whence you come from, what
your station,

Who your forebears, what the
purpose

Brings you to the land of
heroes?"

Oh, no you don't, thought Shea. I've read the *Kalevala* and I know that when you get the ancestry of a man you can clap all sorts of spells on him. Aloud he said courteously:

"I'm Harold Shea, and this is my wife, Belphebe. We come from Ohio."

"Härolsjei? Pelviipi? Ouhaio?" said the man.

"Truth to tell, I do not know
them.

From a distant land you must
be,

Farther than the realm of
Hiisi,

Than the dreaded deeps of
Mana.

Though you come a long way
hither,

Never shall you lack for welcome,

So that beautiful Pelviipi

Ever smooths the path before
you

By her smile so warmly radiant,

Warmly radiant as the sun-
beam."

"Thanks," said Shea drily. "And if it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon you spoke prose. My wife was bitten by a poet once, and it gave her an allergy that makes her uncomfortable when she hears more of it."

The man glanced at Shea suspiciously and at Belphebe appreciatively. "Hear me now, O Härolainen—" he began, but Belphebe, playing up nobly, made a face and a slight retching sound, so he checked, and lowering his voice, said: "Is it not that in far Ouhaio you control your women?"

"No, they control us," said Shea rapidly.

Belphebe frowned; the stranger smiled ingratiatingly. "In our noble land of heroes early do we learn the manner of teaching women their places. Now will I make you the fairest of offers—we shall for one wife exchange the other, and fair Pelviipi shall be returned to you, made most obedient, and with a knowledge of poetry gained from the greatest singer in all *Kalevala*, all the land of heroes."

"Huh?" said Shea. "No, I don't

think I'd care' to go into a deal like that—" and as he caught the stocky man's frown "—at least until I know more about your country. Is Väinämöinen up there at the houses?"

The stranger had been leading them toward the gap in the fence. He said sullenly: "Not there now nor ever will be."

"Oh," said Shea, thinking that he must somehow have made a positional error. "Then whom does this establishment belong to?"

The man stopped, drew himself up, and with as much hauteur as a shorter man can give himself before a taller, said:

"Stranger, it is clear as water
You are new to Kalevala.
No one from the land of heroes
Could mistake great Kau-
komieli,
Oft as Saarelainen mentioned.
Surely have the fame and
glory
Of the lively Lemminkainen
Wafted to your distant coun-
try!"

"Oh-oh," said Shea. "Pleased to meet you, Lemminkainen. Ye-es, your fame has come to Ohio."

He shot a nervous glance at Belphebe. Not having read the *Kalevala*, she was in no position to appreciate exactly how serious

the positional error was. Instead of reliable old Väinämöinen, they had made contact with the most unreliable character in the whole continuum: Lemminkainen, the reckless wizard, and arrant lecher. But trying to pull out now would only make things worse. He went on:

"You have no idea what a pleasure it is to meet a real hero."

"You have met the greatest," said Lemminkainen, modestly. "Doubtless you have come to seek aid against a fire-bird or sea-dragon that is laying waste your country."

"Not exactly," said Shea, as they reached the gate. "You see, it's like this: we have a couple of friends who got stranded in another world, and the magic of our own world isn't strong enough to bring them back. So we thought we'd come to a country where they had real magicians and find somebody with skill enough to manage the job."

Lemminkainen's broad face assumed an expression of immense craftiness. "What price shall be offered for this service thaumaturgic?"

Damn it, thought Shea, can't the man speak plain language? Aloud he said: "What might you want, for instance?"

The stocky man shrugged. "I, the mighty Lemminkainen, have

few needs of anybody. Flocks and herds in plenty have I, fields of rye and barley, girls to kiss and serfs to serve me."

Shea exchanged a glance with Belphebe. As he stood there, debating whether to mention his own technique in magic, Lemminkainen went on:

"Perhaps, if the beautiful Pelviipi—"

"Not on your life!" said Shea quickly.

Lemminkainen shrugged again and grinned. "As you wish, O Härolainen. I have no desire to haggle; and in any case, I have my own wrongs to right. Curses on the Mistress of Pohjola, who refused to let me wed her daughter, and not only that, did not even invite me to her wedding with Ilmarinen the smith. I will slay these wretched people of the land of fog and darkness!"

He suddenly snatched off his cap, flung it on the ground and danced up and down in a paroxysm of rage. Shea tried to recall his *Kalevala*. There was something about a journey of revenge like that in it, and it had not turned out too well for Lemminkainen, as he recalled.

"Wait a minute," he said, "maybe we can make a deal at that. This Pohjola is a pretty tough nut. If you take the two of us along, we might be of a good deal of help in cracking it."

Lemminkainen stopped his capering. "Shall a hero of my stature fear the land of frost and midnight?" he said loftily, then: "Tall you are, but lack the mighty thews of Kalevala's heroes. You might help if the battle were with children."

"Now look here," said Shea, "I may not be built like a truck-horse, but I can do one or two things. With this." He whipped out the épée.

At Shea's draw, Lemminkainen's hand flashed to the hilt of his own broadsword, but he refrained from producing it when it was evident that Shea had no immediate intention of attacking him. He looked at the épée.

"Certainly that is the oddest sword-blade ever seen in Kalevala," he said. "Do you use it as a toothpick or with thread to patch your breeches?"

Shea grinned in his turn. "Feel that point."

"It is sharp; but my wife Kylliki does my darning."

"Still, it wouldn't do you any good if it poked into you, would it? All right, then. Want to see how I use it?"

Lemminkainen's short, broad blade came out. "No, Harold," said Belphebe, putting down her own bundle and beginning to string her bow.

"It's all right, kid. I've dealt with these cut men before. Re-

member the hillside near Castle Carena? Besides, this is just practice."

"Do you wish to try at flat-sides?" said Lemminkainen, amiably

"Exactly. Ready?"

Clang-dzing-zip! went the blades. Lemminkainen, pressing forward, was as good a swordsman with the edge as Shea had ever encountered. He swung forehand, backhand and overhand with bewildering speed, not seeming even to breathe hard. His theory seemed to be to get in close and hit as hard and as often as possible, and to hell with the consequences.

Shea, backing slowly, parried the vicious swings slantwise, wondering what would happen if one of them caught his thin blade at a square enough angle to snap it off. A crack like that could maim or kill a man, even though only the flat of the blade was used. Once Shea tried a riposte; Lemminkainen leaped backward with catlike agility and laughed.

Round and round went Shea, giving ground steadily, trying to save his own breath. Once his foot was not quite firm; a swing almost got him and he had to stagger back three steps, with Belphebe's "Oh!" in his ears. But at last the whirlwind attack slackened. The épée slid out and

scratched along Lemminkainen's forearm.

"You can tickle with that piece of straw," admitted the hero. He swung again, not so accurately this time. Shea turned the blade aside and the épée darted forward to scratch Lemminkainen's shoulder.

"See," said Shea. Lemminkainen growled, but a quick attack brought the point squarely against his midriff before he could even begin an attempt at a parry.

"Now what would happen if I pushed?" said Shea.

"Boastful stranger, that was but a chance occurrence."

"Oh, yeah? Well, let's try it again, then."

Dzing-zip-tick-clang went the blades. This time Lemminkainen, though not in the least winded, was frowning and overanxious. There were only a couple of exchanges before he was off balance and once more Shea put his point against the broad chest before him. He said:

"That, my friend, was no accident. Not twice in a row."

Lemminkainen sheathed his blade and waved a contemptuous hand. "Against an unarmored foe your tricks might gain you a few minutes more of life. But the men of black Pohjola go to war in mail. Do you think that little skewer will do them damage?"

"I don't know what kind of armor they have, but it had better be tight at the joints if they're going to keep this point out."

"I will take you to Pohjola; but enough has not been shown me that I should put the service of my magic to your need. You may be my servant."

Shea shot a glance at Belphebe, who spoke up: "Sir Lemminkainen, the men of your land are marvellous boasters, it appears, though falling somewhat short of the fulfillment of their claims. Yet if losing a contest makes one a servant, you shall be mine; for it would greatly astonish me could you or any of yours surpass me in archery."

Shea suppressed a grin. Belphebe might not have any formal training in psychology, but she knew how to deal with braggarts. The trick was to out-brag them on some point where you knew you could deliver the goods.

Lemminkainen squinted at Belphebe and said: "Härolsjei, I withdraw my offer. In this wife of yours I sought a bed-companion or a cook of victuals tasty. Now I see she is a vixen who needs nothing but chastisement. Wait for my returning."

They were close to the buildings now and Shea noticed for the first time a row of ill-clad serfs who had been watching the

contest with their mouths gaping open. "My bow!" yelled Lemminkainen as they fell back before him. Presently he was back with a crossbow under his arm and a fistfull of bolts stuck in his belt. Shea noticed that the instrument had a bow of steel, with a strip of copper for backing and silver inlay. Quite a handsome piece of artillery in fact.

"Harold," said Belphebe, in a low tone, "not so certain am I that I can in truth best this knave. A strong crossbow of steel in practiced hands can prove most deadly sure."

"Do your best, kid, you'll slaughter him," said Shea, himself feeling a good deal less confident than he sounded.

Lemminkainen said: "Will you have a fixed mark, red-haired baggage, or shall I set a serf to run that we may have the better sport?"

"A fixed mark will do," said Belphebe. She looked as though the only moving target she wanted was Lemminkainen himself.

The hero waved a hand. "See that knot in yonder fence-post, distant from us forty paces?"

"I see it," said Belphebe. "Twill do as well as another."

Lemminkainen grinned, cocked his bow and let drive. The steel-tipped bolt struck the fence-post with a loud crack, three or four inches below the knot.

Belphebe nocked an arrow, drew the string back to her ear, sighted a second and let go. The shaft grazed the edge of the fence-post and whistled off into the long grass.

Lemminkainen's grin widened. "Another, would you?" This time he did even better; his bolt struck the post squarely, about an inch above the knot-bole. But Belphebe's shot stood quivering in the post about the same distance below.

Lemminkainen shot another bolt, then shouted: "I will not be outdone on this turn!" He seemed to be right; his quarrel was squarely in the knot.

A little frown appeared between Belphebe's eyes. She drew, held her draw for a couple of seconds, then lowered the bow and brought it up again to the release point in a single smooth motion. The arrow struck the knot, right beside the bolt.

Shea said: "Seems to me you're both about as good as you can get . . . Hey, why not try that?"

He pointed to where a big crow had flung itself on flapping wings out across the meadow, emitting a harsh *haw!*

Lemminkainen whipped up his crossbow and shot. The bolt whizzed upward, seeming to go right through the bird. A couple of black feathers drifted down,

but after staggering in its flight, the crow kept on. The bolt had merely grazed it.

As the crow steadied, one of Belphebe's arrows sang upward and struck it with a meaty thump. It started to tumble; three more arrows streaked toward it in rapid succession. One missed, but two hit, so that the bird plummeted to earth with three arrows criss-crossing in its carcass.

Lemminkainen stared open-mouthed. There were murmurs from the serfs around the buildings. Belphebe said calmly:

"Now, sirrah, I should like my arrows back."

Lemminkainen swung an arm to indicate that the serfs should take up the task. Then he brightened, and tapped his own chest.

"I, the lively Lemminkainen, am still the greater hero," he said, "because I have excelled in two contests and each of you only in one. But it is not to be denied that you are very good persons of your hands, and in exchange for your help I will chant for you the magic runes you wish."

III

Two women appeared at the door of the main house as they approached in a little procession, with serfs now carrying the bundles. One of the women was

old and wrinkled, the other young and rather buxom, but it occurred to Shea that with a little makeup and a Mainbocher dress, she would be a very nice dish indeed. Lemminkainen seemed to be a good picker.

He said: "Get you to the kitchen, women. We will have food, quickly; for it never shall be said that the great Kaukomieli is less than the most generous of hosts."

As the pair started to turn away, Belphebe stepped forward and extended her hand to the older one.

"Gracious dame," she said, "forgive Sir Lemminkainen's seeming want of courtesy in not making us known to each other. He has no doubt been too much concerned with high matters. I am Belphebe of Faerie, wife to Sir Harold Shea here."

The old woman grabbed Belphebe's hand, her eyes filled with tears, she murmured something unintelligible, then she turned and toddled rapidly into the depths of the house. The nice dish curtsied.

"I am known as Kylliki, the maid of Saari, wife of Lemminkainen," she said, "and she there is his mother. You are welcome."

Lemminkainen regarded her sourly. "Women always must be gabbling," he said. "Come, guests from Ouhaipia, let yourselves sit

down and tell me of this conjuring you wish. I need the names and stations of the persons you wish brought here; who were their forebears, where they now may be, all that is known of them. Moreover, though your skill in magic may be small as compared with that of so accomplished a wizard as myself, it would be well if you added your spells to mine; for it is by no means to be concealed that this is a very difficult task, to draw men from one world to another."

Shea frowned. "I can tell you a good deal about one of them. Dr. Walter Simms Bayard, Ph.D. in psychology from Columbia University, class of—umm—nineteen-forty. He's from—mmm—born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, I believe. Father was—Oswald Bayard, a businessman. Had a department store in Atlantic City. Died a couple of years ago."

Lemminkainen said: "Strange and hard are the names you pronounce, O Härol! And the mother of this Payart? I must have the smallest details of his pedigree and background."

Shea gave what little he knew about Bayard's mother, who lived in New York with another son of the family, and whom he, Shea, had briefly met when he took Belphebe there.

Lemminkainen closed his eyes

in an effort of memory, then said: "And the other whom you would draw to the land of heroes?"

Shea scratched his head. "That's a tough one. All I know about him is that he's a detective of our police force, that his name is Pete and that he breathes through his mouth. Must have adenoids or something. A suspicious character and not too bright."

Lemminkainen shook his head. "Though it is well known that I am one of the greatest of all magicians, I can have no power over one so meagerly depicted as this."

Belphebe spoke up: "Why don't you try getting Walter here first by himself? Perchance in Xanadu, where he is now, he will have learned enough of this Pete to enable Lemminkainen to conjure him up."

"Okay, kid, I think you've got it," said Shea. "Go ahead with Bayard, Lemminkainen, and we'll worry about Pete afterward."

Just at this moment the women came back from the kitchen with another wearing the crude clothes and deferential air of a serf, all three carrying big wooden plates. Each plate bore a huge hunk of rye-bread, a couple of pork chops and a wedge of cheese the size of

Shea's fist. Another serf followed with huge mugs of beer.

Lemminkainen said: "Eat as you will. This little snack should edge your appetite for supper."

Shea's eyes bugged and he said to Belphebe: "I wonder what these people would call a real meal."

Lemminkainen said: "We must eat whole mounds of victuals to enhance our souls for such a journey."

The old woman, his mother, gave a little cry. "Do not go, my son. You are not proof against death."

Lemminkainen spoke around a huge mouthful of food. "No, it is now a thing decided. Little though a hero of my prowess needs the help of others, it is still true as the proverb has it, that bare is the back with no brother behind it, and these strangers of Ouhaiola may help me much."

"But you promised me you would not go," said Kylliki.

"That was before I met these strangers with the strange sword and the strange bow."

The old woman began to cry, wiping her eyes with the hem of her dress. "You are not wanted there. They will set traps of magic all across your way as soon as they know you are coming, and neither the strangers

nor your own strength can keep you from death."

Lemminkainen laughed, spraying the table with fragments of cheese. "Fear is for the women only—and not all of those," he said, and gave Belphebe an admiring glance. Shea began to wonder whether he had not been a little hasty in persuading this buck to accept their services. "Now, go fetch me my finest shirt, for I will no longer delay in starting to show those snakes of Pohjola how we keep feast in the land of heroes."

He stood up and walked around the table toward Kylliki with one hand drawn back. Shea wondered if the hero was going to hit her and wondered what he himself would do if Lemminkainen did, but the nice little dish saved him the trouble of doing anything by getting up hastily and scuttling out of the room. Lemminkainen came back, sat down, took a long drink of beer and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Let us to our spells, O Härol," he said amiably. "I must think a moment that the verses run smoothly."

"So must I," said Shea, producing a pencil and a piece of paper from his pocket, and beginning to set up a sorites. He would have to allow for the fact that the poetic element in this

Finnish magic was very strong indeed, and probably interminably long. Belphebe slid down toward the end of the bench where Lemminkainen's mother was sitting and began talking to her in a low tone. She seemed to be getting results, too, because the old lady was looking noticeably less woebegone.

After a few minutes Kylliki came back with a clean white shirt, and another of some kind of leather with fishscale metal plates sewed onto it in an overlapping pattern, which she laid on the bench beside Lemminkainen. The hero rewarded her by patting her behind, and pulled her down beside him.

"Now you shall hear one of my greatest spells," he said, "for I have composed well and truly. Are you ready, Härol?"

"About as ready as I will be," said Shea.

Lemminkainen leaned back, closed his eyes, and began to sing in a high tenor voice:

"O, thou distant Valter Payart,
Caught in Xanadu's enchantments,

I am sure I know your father,
Since your father's name was
Osvalt—"

There didn't seem to be much of a tune, or rather each line had a tune of its own.

"Oswalt of Atlantic City,
 And your mother's name was
 Linda,
 Of the New York City
 Jacksons,
 See I know of all your people—"

He droned on and on, while Shea tried to concentrate on the sorites. With the back of his mind he was forced to concede that the big lug was probably a pretty good magician. His memory was prodigious, for he hadn't left out a single item of the Bayard biography and connections, though he had heard them only once.

Lemminkainen's verses came faster and faster, until with his voice climbing the scale, he ended:

"Come you now, O Valter
 Payart,
 From the pleasure-dome of
 Kubla,
 To the land of Kalevala.
 You cannot resist my singing,
 Cannot long delay your coming;
 You are standing here before
 us!"

Lemminkainen's voice rose to a scream on the last words, he stood up and swept both hands around his head in a series of magical passes.

Foomp!

There was a rush of displaced

air which rattled the wooden plates and other things around the room, and there was Dr. Walter Simms Bayard of the Garden Institute, Ph.D. in psychology.

Not, however, standing before them. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor, and lying on her back across his lap, clinched in a passionate kiss with him, was one of the houris of Xanadu, wearing about as much as a burlesque queen at the climax of her performance.

Bayard removed his mouth from that of the girl to look around him with amazed eyes.

Lemminkainen said: "Now is it to be seen that I am truly the greatest of wizards. For not only have I conjured this man from another world, but his handmaiden also. O Valterpayart, fitting it is that you should give her to me in reward for my services."

As Bayard released her and both of them began to scramble up, Belphebe plucked at Shea's arm.

"Look at Kylliki," she said in a low voice. "She looks as though she wanted to scratch somebody's eyes out."

"She'll get over it," said Shea. "Besides, if I know Walter, he isn't going to fall for Lemminkainen's bright ideas any more than I did."

"That's what I mean, Harold." Her voice became still lower. "Isn't it true that in this continuum if you know everything about a person, you can always put some kind of spell on them?"

"Gee, you're right, kid. I never thought about it. We'll have to keep an eye on Walter."

IV

Bayard's face slowly turned the color of a well-ripened strawberry. "Look here, Harold," he said, "these tricks of yours—"

"I know," said Shea, "you were just getting acclimated." Belphebe giggled and Lemminkainen guffawed. "Skip it; we haven't got time for temperament. This is Lemminkainen. He's a hero with a capital H."

"How do you do," said Bayard, a trifle loftily, and held out his hand. The hefty man, grinning all over his face at the complimentary description, did not appear to notice it, but ducked a kind of bow from where he sat on the bench. It occurred to Shea that the custom of handshaking probably hadn't been introduced in this continuum. The thought apparently did not occur to Bayard. He frowned darkly, placed a protecting arm around his houri's shoulders, and said:

"This is Miss Dunyazad; Mrs.

Shea, Mr. Harold Shea. Now, Harold, if you'll tell me how to get out of this Norse madhouse, I'll get about it. I don't blame you for bringing me here, of course, but I haven't your taste for adventure."

"It isn't Norse, it's Finnish," said Shea. He grinned. "And I don't think you're going to get out right away. I don't think it would look good if you turned up at the Garden Institute with your Miss Dunyazad and without Pete the cop. At least Belphebe and I found it that way. By the way, I hope he didn't get himself impaled or anything?"

Bayard looked a little mollified as the houri snuggled closer to him. "Oh, he's making the best of a bad business, trying to beat off the Rockette chorus. He's really a very proper Presbyterian, a deacon of the church. The last thing I heard him doing was trying to teach one of the girls the doctrine of original sin. By the way, is there anything solid to eat around here? I'm fed up to the ears with the sticky mess they gave us in Xanadu."

Lemminkainen had been engaged in a huge yawn that showed his tonsils and a great deal else. Now he brought his mouth closed with a snap. "True it is, O noble guestlings, that in the fatigue of my mighty magic, I forget the first duty of a host.

Kylliki! Mother! Fetch supper." He counted guests on his fingers. "A couple of dozen ducks will do. Valtarpayart, I see your handmaiden is dressed for the bath. Does she wish one prepared?"

"No," said Bayard, "but I think she could use the loan of some clothes if you have a few to spare. Couldn't you, my dear?"

Dunyazad nodded dumbly and, as Lemminkainen shouted for clothes, Bayard led her over to a bench and sat down. Shea noticed it was as far as possible from Lemminkainen. Bayard said:

"I don't wish to cavil, Harold, but I really don't see why it was necessary to involve me in this escapade of yours."

Shea explained the magical reasons for the flank attack on Xanadu. "But we still haven't got Pete the cop, and if we ever want to get back to Ohio, we'd better. How much do you know about him? Irish, isn't he?"

"I should say not! I talked with him enough to find out that in spite of being a Presbyterian, his real name is Brodsky, and he's about as Irish as Jawaharlal Nehru. He only has an Irish fixation; wishes he were Irish, tells Irish jokes and sings Irish songs. With that polyp or something he has in his nose,

the result is below Metropolitan Opera standards."

Kylliki came through the door, bringing with her an odor of cooking duck and a long, loose dress which she threw at rather than handed to Dunyazad. Lemminkainen's eyes followed the houri admiringly as she struggled into it. Then he yawned again and said: "Scanty is the tale you give me of this Piit you are seeking."

"Well," said Bayard, "let's see. He was promoted to second grade detective for the work he did on the Dupont case. I've heard that a dozen times. He works out of the Madison Street station. His mother is named Maria, and his father was named Pete, too, and was a bricklayer, and wanted him to tend bar when he grew up. He himself had the idea of being a pro football player. Will that do?"

Lemminkainen shook his head gloomily. "Only such a master of magic as I would dare attempt the passing-spell with materials so scanty. And even I must meditate on it until morning, for I am foredone with labors mighty."

"Why not now?" Bayard appealed to Shea. "I'd like to see how this is done. I may be able to use it."

Shea shook his head. "Won't do, honest, Walter. You don't

know the first thing about magic yet. It has rational rules, but they follow a different kind of logic than anything you've had any experience with. And I wouldn't advise you to stay around while Lemminkainen is fishing for Pete, either. You've worked up quite a bit of magical potential by being pulled here from Xanadu. So if Lemminkainen does fetch Pete, and you're right here handy, you're a little bit apt to pop right back into Xanadu along the lines of weakness created by the spell while he's coming here. Remember the trouble we had, dear?"

"Marry, that do I," said Belphebe. "But let us not dwell upon it; for here's our sup."

This time there were seven servants in the procession. Each bore a wooden tray upon which a mountain of bread was surrounded by three whole roast ducks except the one who served Lemminkainen. He had six.

When he had finished the last of them, with one of the ducks Shea was unable to eat, he stretched, yawned again, and said: "Härol, friend and helper of the lively Lemminkainen, you shall have tonight the lock-bed. Will you lead Pelviipi to it? As for these guests, the late-comers, they shall have my best of bearskins to compose them by the

hearth-fire. Come, Kylliki, lead me bedward, for I cannot walk unaided."

Shea thought the spell must have taken a lot out of the big oaf at that as he watched him stagger toward his sleeping quarters, but had to admit that Lemminkainen was cheerfully keeping to his side of their bargain, even if he did talk in that phony poetry.

One of the servants with a rush torch showed him and Belphebe down to the end of the hall where the lock-bed was. It was bigger than a Pullman section, but not very much, and both of them had to roll up clothes for pillows . . .

"What the hell's that?" said Shea, sitting upright and cocking an ear toward the foot of the bed.

Belphebe giggled where she lay. "That, my most puissant and delectable lord, would seem to be the hero and his spouse engaged in a sport we wot of; to wit, a quarrel within the household. Hark! She has just called him frog-spawn."

Shea gazed at the partition which separated them from the room to which Lemminkainen had retired. "Well, I hope they get over it soon," he said. "With your woods-trained ears you can make out what they're saying and enjoy the show, but all it

sounds like to me is a racket."

They did get through with it fairly soon, at that, but now the reindeer skins that served as blankets were too hot when they were on and he was too cold with them off. Besides, the straw mattress resembled a relief map of the Himalayas, and he never could get used to sleeping in a place where there weren't any windows, even if cracks in the outer wall did admit enough air.

Something scratched at the door of the lock-bed.

Shea listened for a minute, then turned over.

The something scratched again, this time in what was clearly a signal, for the scratching came one—two—three.

Shea jackknifed to a sitting posture in the Pullman berth and slid the door of the lock-bed open a crack. Down the hall the fire on the hearth was at the ember stage, throwing a red light over the two mounds beside it that must be Bayard and his Dunyazad. It gave just illumination enough for Shea to make out the figure of the nice little dish, Kylliki, bending over at the entrance to the lock-bed. One finger went to her lips and then beckoned.

Shea experienced a dreadful if momentary sinking of the heart at the thought he might have a female wolf on his hands, but

Kylliki settled the question for him by sliding the door of the lock-bed farther open and reaching past him to touch Belphebe into wakefulness, then sat down on the edge of the lock-bed. When the couple had taken their places beside her, she leaned close and said in a stage whisper:

"There is treason afoot."

"Oh—oh," said Shea. "What kind?"

"My husband, the hero Kaukomieli. Who can resist him?"

"I dunno, but we can give it the old college try. What's he up to?"

"I learned but now his purpose. 'Tis to evade the making of the spell for bringing from hence to hither your other friend. Such wizardries leave him always weak and foredone, as you saw but this evening."

"Why, the—" began Shea, reaching for his épée, but Belphebe said: "Hold, Harold, there must be more in this than meets the eye, and meseems it's more a matter for craft than violences." She turned to Kylliki. "Why do you give us this tale? It cannot be a matter of concern for you whether this Pete be summoned or no."

In the darkness they could plainly hear the girl grind her teeth. "Because of the other wing to his bird of thought," she

flared. "Instead of going to Pohjola, he'd be off to the lakes with that immodest she-devil who wears no clothes."

"Dunyazad," said Shea. "What do you want us to do about it?"

"Be off," said Kylliki. "Take him to Pohjola with the dawn. It is the lesser peril."

Shea thought of Lemminkainen's barrel-like chest and huge arms. "I don't see how we're going to make him do anything he doesn't want to," he said.

Kylliki laid a hand on his arm. "You do not know my lord," she said. "This night he lies weaker than a newborn reindeer calf with the back-whip of his spell-making. I have a rope; bind him while the weakness is on him, and steal him away."

Belphebe said: "I think she has the key that will unlock our troubles, Harold. If we bind Lemminkainen tonight, then we can keep him tied up until he makes the spell that will bring Pete. And then he will be too weary to think on revenges."

"Good for you, kid," said Shea, heaving himself to his feet and reaching for his pants. "All right, let's go. But I think we'll need Walter to help."

Getting Walter was not so easy as it looked. He was sleeping the sleep of the just after his prolonged vacation in Xanadu, and shaking him only pro-

duced a series of contented grunts. Dunyazad's head came out of the bearskins though, to look at the three standing over her with mild, cow-like eyes, not saying a word, even when Kylliki hissed at her like a cat. Shea decided that Dunyazad belonged to the beautiful but dumb type.

After an interminable time Bayard pulled himself together and accompanied Shea into Lemminkainen's room, where a rushlight held by Kylliki showed the hero sprawled cornerwise across the bed with all his clothes on, fully dressed and snoring like a sawmill. He didn't even move when Shea cautiously lifted a leg to put a coil of rawhide rope around it, and only changed the rhythm of his snores as they rolled him back and forth, wrapping him like a cocoon in the tough rawhide.

Kylliki said: "His mother will think little good of this. The old harridan! She would as lief he cohabited with Tunjasat or any other strumpet, so he stayed by her hand. I could tear her hair out."

"Why don't you?" suggested Shea, with a yawn. "Well, come on, kid, let's try to get a little shut-eye. When that big lug comes to, it will be like trying to sleep in the same house as a steam calliope."

He was amply borne out after

what seemed little more than ten minutes of slumber, and jerked out of bed to follow Bayard into the other room, from which a series of truly majestic howls were emerging.

Lemminkainen was rolling around the floor of the room, shrieking curses and trying to writhe loose, while Kylliki, with no attempt at all to disguise the sneer on her pretty face, was cursing just as fast at him. Suddenly, the hero relaxed, screwed up his face, and in his singing voice began to chant:

“Think you that I’ll heed your
wishes,
Now you’ve flouted and
provoked me,
By your stratagems and
insults?
I will live to see you, strangers,
All except the fair Tunjasat,
Hurled into the depths of Mana,
Down to Hiisi’s kingdom
tumbling!
Think you that this rope can
hold me,
Me, the wizard Kaukolainen?
Just observe how from my
members
Are the cords impotent
falling!”

Shea stared; it was true. The cords around his feet were working loose. He tried to think of a counter-spell and couldn’t.

Bayard said: “Hey, cut that out!” He seemed to be addressing a point a foot or two beyond Lemminkainen.

“Cut what out?” asked Shea.

“Untying him.”

“But if his magic—”

“Magic my foot! I’m talking about the old lady.”

“What old lady?” said Shea.

“I guess she’s Lemminkainen’s mother. Are you blind?”

“Apparently I am. You mean she’s there, invisible, untying him?”

“Certainly, but she’s not in the least invisible.”

The coils of rope had worked themselves loose from feet, ankles and knees. The triumphantly grinning Lemminkainen gave a massive wriggle and came to his feet.

“Well, for God’s sake, stop her!” said Shea.

“Huh? Oh, yes, I suppose so.” Bayard stepped over to where Lemminkainen was standing and grabbed at the air. There was a scream; a couple of feet away from the hero, Lemminkainen’s mother materialized with her hair over her eyes, glaring as Bayard held both her hands. Kylliki glared right back at her.

“Now, now,” said Shea. “We’re not going to hurt your son, lady. Only make sure that he carries out his part of the bargain.”

“An evil bargain. You will

take him to his death," croaked the old woman.

"And you would make him a woman-bound weakling instead of a hero," snapped Kylliki.

"That's right," said Shea. "Must say I'm disappointed in you, Kauko."

A portentous frown had replaced Lemminkainen's smile. "How mean you?" he demanded.

"Here I thought you were the greatest hero of Kalevala, and you get cold feet over the Pohjola project."

Lemminkainen gave an inarticulate bellow, then subsided to a mere roar. "Me, afraid? By Jumala, loose me from these bonds and I'll make you a head shorter to show you how afraid I am!"

"Nothing doing, Toots. You fetch Pete from Xanadu, and then we'll discuss any changes of plan."

The hero put on his crafty expression. "If your friend the sly detective is brought here from Xanadu, will you, Payart, give me the fair Tunjasat?"

"I really don't think—" began Bayard, but Shea cut him off with: "Nothing doing. That wasn't in the original contract. You go right ahead, or the whole deal's off."

"Well, then. But from these bonds you must release me, else

my magic spells will falter."

Shea swung to Kylliki. "Can I trust him?" he asked.

Her head came up. "Fool! My husband is no promise-breaker . . . But—he may put a spell on Payart to make him yield up the maiden."

Shea stepped across to Lemminkainen and began to untie knots. "That's right, Walter. And besides, there's the danger that you might get blown back into Xanadu by the spell. You better get out of here, as far away from the building as you can. I don't know what the local range of magic is, but it can't be very high."

Bayard obediently made for the door. As the last loop fell from his arms, Lemminkainen stretched them over his head, sat down and corrugated his forehead in thought. At last he said: "Are you ready, Härol? Good; let us begin."

He tilted back his head and sang:

"Oh, I know you, Peter Protzky,
And from Xanadu I call
you . . ."

He droned on. Shea quietly worked away on the sorites. Up and up went the voice of Lemminkainen. And just as it almost reached screaming pitch, in through the door came Dun-



yazad, her lovely, vacant face inquiring.

"Have you seen my lord?" she asked.

". . . you are with us!" finished Lemminkainen, on a high C.

There was a rush of air; for a moment only a cloud of burning sparks hung where the houri had been, and then they went out, leaving the space occupied by a solid-looking man in a rumpled brown American business suit.

V

"What the hell is this?" he said, and then his eye fell on Harold Shea. "Shea! You're under arrest! Kidnapping and resisting an officer!"

Shea said: "I thought we'd been all through that."

"Oh, you did, did you? And you thought you could stash me away in that screwball fairyland while you went on and rolled your hoop? Well, you've got staging an indecent theatrical performance on top of the other charges now. How do you like that? You better come along with me."

"Come along where?" said Shea.

"Huh?" Pete Brodsky looked around the room and at the slumping Lemminkainen. "Beljabbers, where is this dump?"

"In Kalevala," Shea said.

"And where would that be? Canada?"

Shea explained, adding: "And here's the wife I'm supposed to have kidnapped or murdered. Darling, this is Detective Brodsky. Pete, this is Belphebe. Does she look dead?"

"Are you really the dame that disappeared at that picnic, back in Ohio?" asked Brodsky.

"Marry, that I am," said Belphebe, "and through no fault of my husband's, either."

"And in the second place," said Shea, "you're out of your bailiwick. You haven't any authority here."

"You con-merchants always try to play it smart, don't you? The law of close pursuit takes care of that. Constructively, I've been in close pursuit of you ever since you pulled that fast one on me back in Ohio. Where's the nearest American consul?"

"Better ask Lemminkainen," said Shea, "he's the local boss."

"The big guy? Can he speak English?"

Shea smiled. "You got along all right in Xanadu, didn't you? You're speaking Finnish without knowing it."

"Okay, say mister—"

Lemminkainen had been sitting slumped over. Now he lifted his head. "Get you hence and let me sorrow," he said. "Ah,

that by my own efforts I should be deprived of the embraces of the beautiful Tunjasat!" He glared at Shea. "Man of ill-omen," he said, "if I but had my strength, there would be an accounting."

Kylliki said: "Much strength will come to him who eats good food."

Lemminkainen appeared to brighten at the thought. "Then why do you waste time in foolish chatter when food is lacking?" he said practically, and Kylliki scuttled out, followed by his mother. Shea went off to hunt up Bayard and explain what had happened to Dunyazad. The psychologist did not seem unbearably grieved.

"An excellent exercise for the libido," he said, "but I fear that in time she would have become importunate. Persons of her order of intelligence frequently consider that beauty entitles them to great consideration without effort," and accompanied Shea back into the house for breakfast.

Lemminkainen took his in his bedroom while the other three ate with Pete Brodsky, who did prodigious execution to a breakfast of roast meat, cheese, and beer, belching appreciatively afterward.

"Maybe I got you Joes kinda wrong," he said, as he wiped his

mouth with a dirty handkerchief. "You may be all right guys at that—sorta elect, if you get me. Gimme the pitch, will you?"

Shea told him as well as possible what had happened in the continuum of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and why Vaclav Polacek and Dr. Reed Chalmers were still there. "But," he continued virtuously, "we couldn't very well leave you and Walter Bayard in Xanadu, could we?"

"I get it," said Brodsky. "You figured you had to spring us out of that reefer-dream or else pull a bit yourself. Okay; so you're a square. I bought it. What's the next lay?"

Shea told him about the Pohjola project. Brodsky looked glum. "So we gotta go up there and crack this box with a lot of them door-shakers on the lay? Me, I don't like it. Why can't we just take it on the lam for Ohio? I'll kill the rap for you."

Shea shook his head. "Not me. Especially after the fuss I made about Lemminkainen running out on his end of the bargain. Listen, you're in a place where magic works, and it's funny stuff. When you get something by promising something else, and then try not to deliver, you're apt to find yourself without the thing you wanted."

"You mean if we went lames-ter, this Bayard and me would

land back in that de luxe hoppen?"

"Something like that."

Brodsky shook his head. "Jeez, you're shot with horse-shoes that you got a Joe with you that believes in predestination. Okay, when do we take it?"

"Probably tomorrow, Lemminkainen knocked himself out bringing you from Xanadu, and won't be fit to eat till then."

"I got it," said Brodsky. "What we got for today? Just bending the ears?"

Shea turned around and looked out the window. "I guess so," he said. "It seems to have started raining."

It was a long day. Kylliki and Lemminkainen's mother trotted in and out, carrying trays of food to the recumbent hero, and occasionally dropping one off at the table in the hall, where Brodsky and Walter Bayard had started an endless discourse on predestination, original sin, and Cartesianism. After awhile, Shea and Belphebe wandered off into a corner and let them talk, since neither Kylliki nor the mother seemed very sociable. It had already grown toward evening and the lowering skies were definitely darker, though none of the rush-lights had been kindled, when Bayard and Brodsky approached the couple.

"Say, listen," said the detec-

tive. "Me and this Bayard, we been thinking, and we worked up a hot lineup. You know this magic stuff. How about you putting one of these spells on Lemon Meringue there, and make him drop his score on this Pohjola joint; just skip it? Then he just springs us back where we belong, see?"

Shea was doubtful. "I don't know. There's likely to be a kick-back. He's a pretty hot wizard, and playing on his home grounds, where he knows all the rules and I don't. Besides, I warned you about what happens when you try to get out of a magical bargain."

"But look here," said Bayard, "we aren't proposing anything unethical, even in the terms of magic. All we're suggesting is a spell that will make him see things our way. He'll have the credit of having performed a great action in rescuing us, which these heroes of romance prize more highly than anything else, as I gather it, and as a more material reward, you can leave him some of your artifacts. That sword of yours, or Belphebe's bow, for instance."

Shea turned to his wife. "What do you say, kid?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I like it none too well; but I can see no

true argument contrarious. Do as you will, Harold."

"Well, I suppose doing almost anything's better than doing nothing." He stood up and stretched. "Okay, I'll try."

He managed to waylay Lemminkainen's mother to ask her something about the hero's background, bearing in mind that one of the requirements of Kalevala magic was a fairly intimate acquaintance with the person or thing you were going to put a spell on. It was like putting soap in a geyser; the old dame prattled away at a furious pace, and Shea soon discovered that his own memory was by no means the equal of Lemminkainen's, so that he had to reopen the floodgates a couple of times by asking her to repeat. The process lasted through another of the gigantic Kalevalan meals; when it was over, Shea retired to the corner of the fireplace with a big mug of beer and tried to work out a chant in iambic tetrameters along the line Lemminkainen had used. The form wasn't very familiar to him and he kept forgetting lines, so he got a charred stick and tried scratching some of the keywords on the floor. While he was about it the others drifted off to bed and Bayard was already snoring from his pile of bearskins when Shea, satisfied at last, took one

of the rush-lights, made his way to the door of the hero's bedroom, and in a low voice, chanted his composition.

As he finished, something seemed to flash before his eyes and he felt a little dizzy. It might be the beer, but he rather thought the spell had worked, and he staggered weakly across to the lock-bed, almost missing the bracket when he put the rush-light in it.

Belphebe sat up, with the skin-blankets gathered close around her chin, and her expression was far from welcoming.

"'Lo, sweetheart," said Shea. He hiccupped slightly, sat down on the edge of the bed and started to take off his boots.

Belphebe said: "Begone, sir. I'm an honest wife."

"Huh?" said Shea. "Whoever said you were anything else? And why the fire-alarm?"

He reached out an arm for her. Belphebe wriggled toward the back of the bed, her voice suddenly going high. "Harold! Walter! Help—I am beset!"

Shea looked at her in bewilderment. Why was she dodging him? He hadn't done anything. And why was she calling for "Harold," when he was right there?

Before he could think up anything intelligent to say, Bayard's voice said from behind

him: "He's at it again; grab him and tie him up till Harold can do something about it."

"Is everybody crazy?" demanded Shea and felt Brodsky grab his arm. He pulled loose and threw a punch at the detective which the latter dodged with a slight movement of his head. Then the light went out.

Shea awakened with a splitting headache and a dark brown taste in his mouth. There had been too much beer; and on top of that he was hog-tied even more efficiently than he had bound Lemminkainen the previous night. It was just about dawn; somewhere outside he could hear a clink of metal as a serf went about the early business of the house. The two piles of bearskins near him on the floor would be Bayard and Brodsky.

"Hey, you guys!" he called. "What happened?"

One set of snores bit off, a head lifted and Brodsky's voice said: "Listen, glom. We dropped you dead bang. Now dummy up before I let you have it again."

Shea fumed inwardly. From the feeling at the side of his cranium Brodsky had let him have it all right, and with a peculiarly solid blackjack. The prospect of another treatment had no appeal. But he could not understand why everybody was

behaving that way—unless perhaps Lemminkainen had put some kind of spell on him while he was trying to work on the hero. That must be it, Shea decided, and lay uncomfortably, trying to work out a counter-spell in Kalevalan terms. While he was doing that, he must have drifted off into a doze again. He wakened to a roar of laughter.

It was fully light. The entire household was standing around him, including Belphebe with a worried expression, and the laughter came from Lemminkainen, who was doubled up, choking with mirth. Bayard merely looked surprised.

The master of the house finally got his breath long enough to say: "Fetch me a pail of water, Kylliki—ho, ho, ho!—and we'll give his proper semblance to this son of Ouhaiola."

Kylliki brought the pail. Lemminkainen crooned a spell over it, then dashed it into Shea's face.

"Harold!" cried Belphebe. She threw herself down on Shea and covered his wet and sputtering face with kisses. "You left me burning anxious when you came not to me last night. I had thought you taken in some trap."

"Help me off with this rope," said Shea. "What do you mean I didn't come to you? How do you think I got in this jam?"

"Nay, I see it now," said the girl. "You put on the appearance of Lemminkainen. Was it to test me?"

"Yeah," said Brodsky. "Sorry I sapped you, Shea, but how the hell was we to know?"

Shea stretched cramped arms and scratched a stubby chin. He had put a line about "As if we were twins identic" into his spell the previous night, and it appeared now that this had been a mistake. "I was trying a little spell," he said, "and I guess it must have backfired."

"You were twin to Lemminkainen," said the hero. "Learn, strange man from Ouhaiola, that the laws of magic tell us when a spell is falsely woven, all things wear another semblance. Nevermore seek to equal the master of magic until you know more of the art." He turned. "Mother! Kylliki! We must fall to eating, for we have a journey before us."

Belphebe said to Shea: "Harold, it is well to be warned. This saying that if a spell isn't accurate it will give another look to things is well to remember in this country."

"Yeah, the laws of magic are different. But I wish we'd known that last night."

They took their places at the table. Lemminkainen was in the best of humors, crowing over

Shea's discomfiture and boasting of what he would do to the Pohjolans when he got to them. He seemed to have forgotten about Dunyazad or any other squab. His mother looked more and more melancholy. At last she said:

"If you will not hear me for your own sake, at least listen for mine. Will you leave your mother alone and unprotected?"

"Little protection is needed," said the hero. "But such as you need, I give you. This Payart, this Piit shall stay with you. Not that the two together would be of one-third as much use as such a hero as myself."

"Harold—" began Bayard, and Brodsky said: "Hey, ain't we going with?"

Lemminkainen shook his head firmly. "Never shall I consent. This is hero's work. Häärölsjei has shown he can be a fighting man of sorts, and this shield-maiden is not the worst archer in the world, though far from as good as I am; but you, frogs of Ouhai, what can you do?"

"Listen, lug," said Brodsky, getting to his feet, "come on outside, and I'll show you. I don't care if you're as big as Finn McCool."

Bayard put out a restraining hand. "Just a minute, Pete," he said. "I rather think he's right, at that. The kind of activity in

which we are skilled is of little value in this continuum, and we might be more useful preserving the base, as it were." He glanced at Kylliki. "Besides, it occurs to me that perhaps you could improve the hour. I doubt if any of these people have heard of predestination and original sin."

"Say, you're a good head," said Brodsky, sitting down again. "Maybe if we make that gift good, I could get a couple of converts."

Lemminkainen was already on his feet, leading his way to the door. He took down a long rawhide lariat from a peg and headed out toward the meadow, where the same quartet of animals were grazing. They started walking away; the hero swung the rope and cast it over the nearest antler of an enormous reindeer, then chanting something about "Elk of Hiisi," climbed down the rope and made a loop around the animal's neck with the other end. The reindeer bucked; Lemminkainen gave one jerk and it went down on its knees. Pete Brodsky's eyes opened wide.

"Jeez!" he said softly, "maybe I copped the right dope not trying to go on the muscle with that ghee."

Lemminkainen started back across the meadow, leading the reindeer as though it were a

puppy. Suddenly he stopped and stiffened. Shea followed his glance and saw that a man, too well dressed for a serf, was standing at the door of the main house, talking to Kylliki. As they came closer, it was apparent that the man was about Lemminkainen's own height, but stouter, with a great gray Santa Claus beard. He turned a beaming smile on the hero; they fell into each other's arms and administered powerful slaps on their respective backs, then held each other at arm's length. The stranger declaimed:

"Hail, the lively Lemminkainen!
Is it true you plan to visit
In the fogbound land of Turja,
And with help of foreign
swordsmen
Teach old Ilpotar a lesson?"

They fell into each other's arms and slapped again. "Will you go with me to Pohja?" bawled Lemminkainen.

"Nay, I still seek a new wife!" shouted the graybeard, and both of them laughed as though this were a peculiarly brilliant jest. Brodsky and Bayard pressed close to Shea and muttered questions. Shea said:

"The old guy must be Väinämöinen, the great minstrel and magician. Damn, if I'd known where to find him, I wouldn't have made that deal—"

"What old guy?" said Bayard.

"The one talking to Lemminkainen and whacking him on the back. The one with the beard."

"I don't see any such person," said Bayard. "He's hardly more than an adolescent, with only the beginnings of whiskers."

"What!"

"Not over twenty."

Shea exclaimed: "Then this must be another magical illusion, and he must be after something. Watch him!"

The pseudo-Väinämöinen appeared to be trying to question Lemminkainen, but every now and then one of them would get off five or six lines of poetry, they would fall into each other's arms and begin back-slapping again. Suddenly, at the beginning of one of these declamations, Brodsky leaped, catching the stranger's wrist just as it came sweeping down. The detective twisted deftly, pulled the wrist across his own shoulders and stooped forward. The man's feet flew up, he came down on his head in the long grass with a wicked-looking knife in his hand. Brodsky deliberately kicked him in the ribs. The knife dropped.

The man sat up, a hand pressed to his side and the Santa Claus face twisted with pain. Lemminkainen looked bewildered. Shea said:

"Walter says this man is not

what he seems. Maybe you better make him use his right face."

Lemminkainen crooned a spell and spat on the man's head. A sallow young face glowered up sullenly. The hero said:

"So, my cousins of Pohjola send me greeting for my journey. Bow your head, spy of Pohjola." He drew his broadsword and felt the edge.

"Hey!" said Brodsky, "you can't just bump the ghee off like that!"

"Wherefore not?" said Lemminkainen.

"He ain't gone up or got his bit or nothing. Where's the law?"

Lemminkainen shook his head in honest puzzlement. "Piit, you are surely the strangest of men, whose words are without meaning. Spy, will you bow your head, or shall I have the serfs deal with you in their manner?"

Shea said to Pete: "They don't have judges or trials around here. I told you this guy was the big boss and made his own law."

Pete shook his head. "Some connection man," he said as Lemminkainen's sword whistled through the air. The man's head thumped on the grass in a little fountain of blood. "Serfs, bury this carrion!" Lemminkainen shouted, then turned toward the visitors from Ohio. Shea noticed that the expression of shrewd-

ness had come back into his eyes.

"You have the gratitude of a hero," he said to Brodsky. "Never have I seen a wrestle-hold like that. What do you call it?"

"Ju-jitsu," said Pete. "Any shamus is hep to it."

"On our trip to far Pohjola you shall go with us and show it." His eyes swept the group. "Which of you is so skilled in magic as to have penetrated the false shaping that deceived even me, the master of spells?"

"Why I guess that was me," said Bayard. "Only I'm not skilled in magic at all. Not the way Harold is."

Shea said: "Walter, that must be just the reason. That's why Doc Chalmers couldn't get you out of Xanadu, too. And remember how you saw Lemminkainen's mother untying him when none of the rest of us could? You must be too rational or something, so that spells working a change of appearance make no impression on you." He turned to Lemminkainen. "Bayard would be more help on the trip than all the rest of us put together."

The hero appeared to be making a convulsive and prodigious effort to think. Finally, he said; "For your eyes, O Valterpayart, so be it, since it is not to be concealed that many and strange are the enchantments that beset

the road to this land of fog and darkness."

VI

Under Lemminkainen's direction the serfs dragged out the largest of four sleds that stood in a shed stacked high with harness and similar gear.

"What do you know!" said Pete Brodsky. "Is the big shot going to take a sleigh-ride?"

"We all are," said Shea. "It's the only way they have of traveling here."

The detective shook his head. "If I tell them that back at the precinct, they'll think I'm on the snow myself. Why don't they get wised up and use a heap? Say, Shea, maybe we could dope one out for them! It wouldn't have to be no gold-plated boiler, just something that would buzz. These jakes always go for the big-sounding show."

"It wouldn't work here, even if we could build it," said Shea. "Any more than your gun. You want to remember that nothing that hasn't been invented yet will."

He turned to watch the serfs carrying out armfuls of deer-skin blankets and vast sacks of food, which they lashed in position with rawhide ropes. Two of them trundled out a keg of beer and added it to the heap. It

looked as though the Elk of Hiisi would have his work cut out for him; but gazing at the gigantic beast, Shea decided that it looked capable of meeting the demand. Lemminkainen bawled orders about the stowing of the gear and warmer clothes for Bayard and Brodsky, whose twentieth-century garments he regarded with unconcealed contempt.

Presently the tasks were done. All the serfs came out of the building and formed in a line, with Lemminkainen's two women in the middle. He kissed them smackingly, shouted the others into the sled, and jumped in himself. It immediately became crowded. As he cracked his whip and the giant reindeer strained forward, the whole line of serfs and women lifted their heads back and burst into a high-pitched doleful chanting. Most of them seemed to have forgotten the words of what they were supposed to be singing, and those who remembered were off key.

"Marry!" said Belphebe. "Glad am I, Harold, that these farewells do not come often."

"So am I," said Shea behind his hand, "but it gets Lemminkainen. The mug's eyes actually have tears in them."

"I wish my schnozz was okay again," said Brodsky. "I used to could make them fill a bucket

with eye-juice when I gave them 'Mother Machree.'"

"Then I'm rather glad you got the polyp or whatever it is that prevents you doing it now," said Bayard, and grabbed the side of the sled, as the Elk of Hiisi went into a swinging trot and the sled bounced and skidded along the muddy track northward.

"Now, listen—" began Brodsky, but just at this moment a flying clod of mud from the animal's hooves took him squarely in the face. "Jesus!" he shouted, then with a glance at Belphebe, "Write it on the ice, will you, lady? That was such a nut-buster I forgot for a minute that we gotta take what's laid out for us in the Lord's book, even if he throws the whole package at us."

Lemminkainen turned his head. "Strange the language of Ouhaiio," he said, "but if I hit rightly your saying, O Piit, it is that none may escape the course laid down for him."

"You got it," said Brodsky.

"Then," said the hero, "if one but knew the incantations, one might call forth the spirits of the future to tell what will come of any doing."

"No, wait—" began Brodsky, but Shea said: "They can in some continua."

Bayard said; "It might be worth trying in this one, Harold.

If the thought-patter is right, as you put it, the ability to see consequences might keep us out of a lot of trouble. Don't you think that with your magic—"

They hit a stone just then and Shea collapsed into the lap of Belphebe, the only member of the party who had been able to find a place to sit in the jouncing sled. It was not that the road was worse than before, but the strain of hanging on and being bumped made it too difficult to talk. The trunks of birch and fir fled past them, close by on both sides, like the palings of a fence, the branches closing off all but fugitive glimpses of the sky overhead. The road zigzagged slightly, not, so far as Shea could determine, for topographic reasons—since the country was flat as an ironing board—but simply because it had never been surveyed. Now and then the forest would clear a little on one side and a farmhouse or a small lake would appear among the trees. Once they met another sled, horse-drawn, and everybody had to dismount and manhandle the vehicles past each other.

At last, as they reached one of the lakes, Lemminkainen reined in his singular draft-animal, said: "Pause we here a while for eating," jumped out and began to rummage among the food-bags. When he had con-

sumed one of the usual Gargantuan snacks, belched and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, he announced:

"Valtarpayart and Piit, I have allowed you to accompany me on this journey, but learn that for all your arts, you will be worse than useless unless you learn how to fight. I have brought swords for you, and as we take our ease, you shall learn to use them under the greatest master in all Kalevala."

He dragged a pair of clumpy two-edged blades out of the baggage and handed one to each, then sat down on a root, evidently prepared to enjoy himself. "Cut at him. O Valtarpayart!" he said. "Try to take his head off."

"Hey!" said Shea, with a glance at the woebegone faces of his companions. "This won't do. They don't know anything about this business and they're likely to cut each other up. Honest."

Lemminkainen leaned back. "They learn the swordsman's business, or they go with me no further," he said loftily.

"But you said they could come. That isn't fair."

"It is not in our agreement," said the hero firmly. "They came only by my permission, and that has run out. Either they practice with the swords or turn homeward."

He looked as though he meant it, too, and Shea was forced to admit that legally he was right. But Belphebe said: "In Fairie when we would teach young springalds the use of blades without danger to themselves, we use swords of wooden branch."

After some persuasion Lemminkainen agreed to accept this as a substitute, and the pair were presently whaling away at each other under his scornful correction with single-sticks made from saplings and lengths of cloth wound round their hands for protection. Bayard was taller and had the better reach, but Brodsky's ju-jitsu training had made him so quick that he several times rapped his opponent smartly, and at last brought home a backhand blow on the arm that made Bayard drop his stick.

"An arm was lost that time," said Lemminkainen. "Ah, well; I suppose not everyone can be such a swordsman and hero as Kaukomieli."

He turned away to harness up the reindeer again, and Belphebe laid a hand on Shea's arm to keep him from reminding the hero of their own little bout.

The afternoon was a repetition of the morning journey through country that did not change and whose appearance was becoming as monotonous as the bumping that accompanied their progress.

Shea was not surprised when even Lemminkainen wanted to camp early. With Bayard and Brodsky he set about building a triangular lean-to of branches, while Belphebe and the hero wandered off into the woods in search of fresh game for their evening meal.

While they were picking the bones of some birds that resembled a chicken in size and a grouse in flavor, Lemminkainen explained that he was forced to make this journey to Pohjola because he had learned by his magic that they were holding a great wedding feast there and he had not been invited.

"Crashing the party, eh?" said Brodsky. "I don't get it. Why don't you just give those muzzlers the air?"

"It would decrease my reputation," said Lemminkainen. "And besides, there will be a great making of magic. I should undoubtedly lose some of my magical powers if I allowed them to do this unquestioned."

Belphebe said: "We have bargained to accompany you, Sir Lemminkainen, and I do not seek to withdraw. But if there are so many present as will be at a great feast, I do not see how even with we four, you are much better than you would be alone."

Lemminkainen gave a roar of laughter. "O you maiden, O Pel-

viipi, you are surely not quick-witted. For all magics there must be a beginning. From you and your bowstring I could raise a hundred archers; from the active Härolainen set in line a thousand swordsmen—but not until you yourselves were present.”

“He’s right; kid,” said Shea. “That’s good sympathetic magic. I remember Doc Chalmers giving me a lecture on it once. What have you got there?”

Lemminkainen had picked up several of the long wing and tail feathers from the out-size grouse and was carefully smoothing them out. His face took on the expression of exaggerated foxiness it had worn once or twice before.

“In Pohjola they now surely know that the greatest of heroes and magicians approaches,” he said. “It is well to be prepared for all encounters with something that can be used.” He tucked the feathers in one of his capacious pockets, glanced at the fire which was beginning to show brightly in the gathering dusk, and lumbered off to bed.

Bayard said: “It strikes me, Harold, that the magic in this continuum is quantitatively greater and qualitatively more potent than any you have reported before. And if Lemminkainen can turn you into a thousand swordsmen, can’t the other

people do something like that? I should say it’s rather dangerous.”

“I was just thinking of that,” said Shea, and went to bed himself.

The next day was repetition of the first, except that Brodsky and Bayard were so stiff they could barely drag themselves from their deerskin blankets to go through the sword-exercises on which Lemminkainen insisted before breakfast. There was not much conversation in the sled, but when they assembled around the fire in the evening, Lemminkainen entertained them with a narrative of his exploits until Shea and Belphebe wandered off out of earshot.

It was followed by more of the same. On the fifth day, the single-stick practice at noon had progressed so far that Lemminkainen himself took a hand and promptly knocked Brodsky out with a crack that raised a lump on his head. It appeared to improve relations all around; the detective took it in good part, and the hero was in the best of humor that evening.

But soon after the start the next morning, he began weaving his head from side to side with a peering expression and sniffing. “What’s the trouble?” asked Shea.

“I smell magic; the strong

magic of Pohjola. Look sharp, Valtarpayart."

They did not have to look very sharp. A glow soon became visible through the trees, which presently opened out to reveal a singular spectacle. Stretching down from the right and losing itself round a turn in the distance, came a depression like a dry river-bed. But instead of water this depression was filled with a fiery red shimmer, and the stones and sand of the bottom were glowing like red-hot metal. On the far side of this phenomenon rose a sharp peak of rock, and on the peak of this rock sat an eagle as big as a beach-cottage.

As Shea shielded his face against the scorch, the eagle rotated its head and gazed speculatively at the party.

There was no necessity to rein in the Elk of Hiisi. Lemminkainen turned to Bayard. "What do you see, eyes of Ouhaiola?"

"A red-hot pavement that looks like the floor of Hell, and an eagle several times the size of a natural one. There's a kind of shimmer—no, they're both there, all right," said Bayard.

The giant bird slowly stretched one wing. "Oh-oh," said Shea. "You were right, Walter. This is—"

Belphebe leaped from the sled, tested the wind with an uplifted

finger and began to string her bow; Brodsky looked round and round, pugnacious but helpless.

Lemminkainen said: "Save your arrows, dainty Pelviipi; I myself, the mighty wizard, know a trick worth two of this one."

The monster eagle leaped into the air. Shea said: "I hope you know what you're doing, Kauko," and whipped out his epée, feeling how inadequate it was. It was no longer than one of the bird's talons and nowhere near as thick.

The eagle soared, spiralled upward, and then began to come down on them in a prodigious power dive as Bayard gasped. But Lemminkainen left his own weapon hanging where it was, contenting himself with tossing into the air the feathers of the big grouse, chanting a little staccato ditty whose words Shea could not catch.

The feathers turned themselves into a flock of grouse, which shot off slantwise with a motorcycle whirr. The eagle, almost directly over them—Shea could see the little movements of its wing-tips and tail-feathers as it balanced itself on the air—gave a piercing shriek, flapped its wings, and shot off after the grouse. Soon it was out of sight beyond the treetops westward.

"Now it is to be seen that I am not less than the greatest

of magicians," said Lemminkainen, sticking out his chest. "But this spelling is wearisome work, and there lies before us this river of fire. Härol, you are a wizard; do you make a spell against it while I restore myself with food."

Shea stood gazing at the redness and pondered. The glowing flicker had a hypnotic effect, like a dying wood-fire. A good downpour ought to do the trick, he decided, and began recalling a rain-spell he and Chalmers had been working up, in the hope of putting down the flaming barrier around Castle Carena during their adventures in the world of the *Orlando Furioso*.

He muttered his spell and made the passes. Nothing happened.

"Well?" said Lemminkainen, with his mouth full of bread and cheese. "When does the spell begin?"

"I tried," said Shea, puzzled, "but—"

"Fool of Ouhaiola! Must I teach you your business? How do you expect a spell to work when you do not sing it?"

That's right, thought Shea. He had forgotten that in this Kalevalan magic, song was an indispensable feature. With his own ability at versification, the passes Lemminkainen did not know how to make, and singing, this spell

ought to be a humdinger. He lifted his arms for the passes again and sang at the top of his voice.

The spell was a humdinger. As he finished it, something black seemed to loom overhead, and the landscape was instantly blotted out by a shower of soot-lumps as heavy and tenacious as snowflakes. Shea hastily cancelled the spell.

"Truly, a wonderful wizard!" cried Lemminkainen, coughing and trying to slap the clinging stuff from his clothes. "Now that he has shown us how to make soot of the river of fire, perhaps he will tell us how to bring fog to Pohjola!"

"Nay," said Belphebe, "you shall not be so graceless to my lord. I do declare him an approved sorcerer; but not if he must sing, for he cannot carry one note beyond the next, as I have too often learned." She reached out one hand comfortingly.

Brodsky said: "If I could flag down a right croaker to fix my schnozz, maybe we could work something together."

"I must even do it myself then," said Lemminkainen. He tossed soot-contaminated beer from his mug, drew a fresh one from the keg, took a prodigious swig, leaned back, meditated a moment, and sang:

"Ice of Sariola's mountains,
Ice of ten years' snows compacted,
Forgèd into Turja's glaciers,
Glaciers ever downward flowing,
In the sea with thunder
breaking . . ."

For a while it was not clear what he was driving at. Then a shimmering something appeared in the air over the fiery trench, and gradually hardened with a sparkle of color. A bridge of ice!

But just as Lemminkainen reached the climax of his song which should have materialized the ice and welded it into a solid structure, there was a slip. Down into the trench roared the bridge of ice in fragments, to shatter and hiss and fill the landscape with vapor.

Lemminkainen looked sour and started again. Everyone else held his breath, watching; even the Elk of Hiisi. This time the bridge melted and vanished even before it was complete.

With a yell of rage, Lemminkainen hurled his cap on the ground and danced on it. Bayard laughed.

"You mock me!" screamed the wizard. "Outland filth!" He snatched up his beer-mug from where he had put it and flung the contents in Bayard's face. There was less than an inch of

beer remaining, but even so it was enough to produce a lively display of suds.

"No!" cried Shea, reaching for his epée as Belphebe grabbed her bow.

But instead of leaping up in anger, instead of even wiping the beer from his face, Bayard was staring fixedly at the trench of fire, blinking and knitting his eyebrows. At last he said:

"It's an illusion after all! There isn't anything there but a row of little peat-fires made to look big and only burning in spots. But I don't see how I came to miss it before."

Shea said: "Must be the alcohol in the beer. The illusion was so strong that you couldn't see through it until you got the stuff in your eyes. That happened to me once in the continuum of the Norse gods."

"The spells of Pohjola grow stronger as we approach their stronghold," said Lemminkainen, his anger forgotten. "But what counsel shall we take now? For I am too undone with spell-working to undertake the labor of breaking so powerful a magic."

"We could wait till tomorrow when you'd have your punch back," suggested Shea.

Lemminkainen shook his head. "They of Pohjola will surely know what has happened here, and if we are checked by one

magic, another and stronger will grow behind, so that at each step the way becomes more impassable. But if now we break through, then their magic becomes weaker."

"Look here," said Bayard. "I think I can resolve this. If you'll give me some beer for eye-wash, I can lead the way through. There's plenty of space, even for the sled."

The Elk of Hiisi snorted and balked, but Lemminkainen was firm with him as Bayard walked ahead, dipping his handkerchief in a mug of beer and applying it to his eyes. Shea found that although he was uncomfortably warm, he was not being cooked as he expected; nor did the sled show any signs of taking fire.

On the far side, they went up a little slope and halted. Bayard started back toward the sled and then halted pointing at a tall dead pine.

"That's a man!" he cried.

Lemminkainen leaped clumsily from the sled, tugging at his sword, Shea and Brodsky right behind him. As they approached the pine its branches seemed to collapse with a gentle swoosh, and they were looking at a stocky man of about Lemminkainen's own proportions, his face wearing an expression of sullen bitterness.

"I had thought there must be

someone near us for illusion-making," roared Lemminkainen, happily. "Bow your head, magician of Pohjola."

The man looked around quickly and desperately. "I am Vuohinen the champion, and I challenge," he said.

"What does he mean?" asked Shea.

"A true champion may always challenge, even in another's house," said Lemminkainen. "Whoever wins may take off the head of the other or make him his serf. Which of us do you challenge?"

Vuohinen the champion looked from one to the other and pointed to Bayard, "This one. What is his art?"

"No," said Lemminkainen, "for his art is the seeing eye that penetrates all magics, and if you challenge him, you have already lost, since he penetrated your disguise. You may have Härol here, with the point-sword; or the shield-maiden Pelviipi with the bow, or Piit in wrestle, or myself with the broadsword." He grinned.

Vuohinen looked from one to the other. "Of the point-sword I know nothing," he said, "and while there is doubtless no bowman in the world half as good as myself, I have other uses for women than slaying them. I choose Piit in open wrestle."

"And not the lively Kaukomieli!" said Lemminkainen with a laugh. "You think you have chosen safely. But you shall see what unusual arts lie among the outland friends of Kalevala. Will you wrestle with him, Piit?"

"Okay," said Brodsky, and began shucking his shirt. Vuohinen already had his off.

They circled, swinging their arms like a pair of indifferently educated apes. Shea noticed that Vuohinen's arms reminded him of the tires of a semi-trailer truck, and the detective looked puny beside him. Then Vuohinen jumped and grabbed. Brodsky caught him by the shoulders and threw himself backward, placing the sole of his foot against Vuohinen's midriff and shoving upward as he fell, so that his antagonist flew over him and landed heavily on his back beyond Brodsky's head.

Lemminkainen gave a bellow of laughter. "I will make a song about this!" he shouted.

Vuohinen got up somewhat slowly and scowling. This time he came in more cautiously, then when at arm's length from Brodsky, suddenly threw himself at the detective, the fingers of his left hand spread straight for the other's eyes. Shea heard Belphebe gasp, but even as she gasped, Brodsky jerked his head back and, with a quickness

wonderful to behold, seized the thumb of the clawing hand in one of his, the little finger in the other and, bracing himself twisted powerfully.

There was a crack; Vuohinen pinwheeled through the air and came down on his side, then sat up, his face contorted with pain, feeling with the other hand of a wrist and fingers that hung limp.

"There was a creep in Chi tried to pull that rat caper on me once," said Brodsky pleasantly. "Want any more, or have you got the chill?"

"It was a trick," Vuohinen bleated. "With a sword—"

Lemminkainen stepped forward cheerfully. "Do you wish his head as trophy?" he asked, "or himself to serve you daily?"

"Aw," said Brodsky, "I suppose he ain't much use as a patsy with that busted duke, but let's let him score for the break. The pastor would put the run on me if I hit him with the lily." He walked over to Vuohinen and kicked him deliberately. "That's for the rat caper. Get up!"

Vuohinen made the sled more crowded than ever and, as Brodsky had said, was of no great value as a servant, but he did make lighter the job of collecting firewood in the evening. Moreover, Brodsky's victory had improved relations with Lemmin-

kainen. He still insisted that Bayard practice daily with the detective—they were at the point where they used real swords now—but now the hero himself practiced ju-jitsu falls and holds and tumbles almost daily. He was an apt pupil, too.

Around the travelers the air was colder; plumes of vapor appeared at their nostrils and those of the reindeer. The sun never seemed to break through the overcast any more. The trees became sparser and stunted, growing scattered among little grassy hillocks. Sometimes Belphebe brought home no game at all in the evening, and more often than not, it would be two or three rabbits, which sent Lemminkainen back to the stored provisions after he had eaten his share.

Still the sled bumped and slid along the muddy track northward, until one afternoon, as they came over a little hill from behind a group of trees, Lemminkainen cried: "Great Jumala! Look at that!"

Before them, stretching out of sight in both directions a prodigious fence ran across the valley. A row of palings, less than a foot apart and reaching almost to the low cloud canopy; but it was the sight of the horizontal members that really made Shea's scalp prickle. For the palings

were bound together by an immense mass of snakes, wound together in and out, though whether they got that way because they wanted to or because someone had tied them in that grotesque fashion, it was impossible to tell.

As the sled slid up, the reindeer shying and trembling, the snakes turned their heads toward the party and began hissing like a thousand teakettles.

"It must be an illusion," said Bayard, "though at present I can't see anything but that mass of serpents. Give me some beer."

Lemminkainen drew some of the fluid from the cask. Vuohinen's face held a sneer of triumph. The reason was apparent as soon as Bayard dabbed the liquid in his eyes, stared at the remarkable fence again, and shook his head.

"They still look like serpents to me," he said. "I know it can't be true, but there they are."

Shea said: "Couldn't we just assume they're fakes and cut our way through?"

Lemminkainen shook his head gloomily. "Learn, O Härol of Ouhaio, that within this field of magic everything has all the powers of its seeming unless its true name be known."

"I see. And we're now right into Pohjola, where their magic

is really strong. You couldn't try a spell yourself to take this one off, whatever it is?"

"Not unless I know the real name beneath this false seeming," said the hero.

"Maybe we can play it straight," said Shea, and turning to Belphebe, "How about trying a shot with your bow at one of those beasties? The way I understand it, if you killed one, it would have to return to its proper form."

"Not so, O Härolainen," said Lemminkainen. "It would be a dead serpent merely until we learned its true form. And there are thousands."

They gazed at the spectacle for a moment or two. It was fairly revolting, but the snakes made no movement to leave their position.

Suddenly Pete Brodsky said: "Hey! I got a idea."

"What is it?" asked Shea.

Brodsky jerked a thumb toward Vuohinen. "This gummy belongs to me, don't he?"

"Under the laws of this country, I believe that's right," said Shea, and "He is your serf," said Lemminkainen.

Brodsky said: "And he's on this magic lay in this joint?"

Shea said: "Why, so he is, now that you mention it. He must have been the one who worked the river of fire and the eagle."

Brodsky reached a hand out and grabbed Vuohinen by the collar. "All right, punk! What's the right name for them potato-water dreams out there?"

"Awk!" said Vuohinen. "Never will I be a traitor—"

"Bag your head on that stuff. Come across with the right dope, or I'll have shorty here let you have it." He pointed significantly to the sword that hung at Lemminkainen's side.

"Awk!" said Vuohinen again, as the hand twisted in his collar. "They are—made from lingonberries."

Walter Bayard said: "Why, so they are!" He walked across to the hissing, snarling barrier, deliberately reached out his hand, twisted the head off one of the serpents, and ate it.

Lemminkainen laughed, "Now there will be a removing of spells, and then we shall have lingonberry dessert to our meal. I thank you, friend Piit."

VII

The lingonberry wall came down to a tangled mat of vegetation under Lemminkainen's ministrations and they camped just beyond. The hero was in hilarious humor, making a series of jokes which nobody but Brodsky found diverting, and shouting with laughter over his own sal-

lies, until Shea said: "For the love of Mike, Kauko, what's got into you tonight? You sound as though you had just won the first prize."

"And have I not, Härol? For I know well that we are through the last barrier that Louhi can throw against us, and tomorrow we will arrive at Pohjola's hall—perhaps to fight."

Shea said: "I can see that would be just about the best thing that ever happened."

He himself didn't feel the same way, not even in the morning when they began to sight tilled fields with a few domestic animals. Presently there was a stead of considerable size visible among the tops of the low trees. Lemminkainen clucked at the Elk of Hiisi and the giant reindeer pulled up beside a slow stream that wound across the featureless landscape.

The hero dug into the duffle at the rear of the sled for his shirt of scale-nail and put it on, "For you, my friends," he said, "I have brought armor second in quality only to my own."

He dragged out four sleeveless hip-length jackets of a double thickness of leather, tanned so stiff that Shea found it was all he could do to get into the thing. It was just as heavy as a well-made steel cuirass would have been, far more clumsy and less

effective, but he supposed the metallurgy of Kalevala would not be up to such an article. Belphebe wriggled out of hers almost as soon as she was in it. "Marry," she said, "you may keep your beetle's bodice, Sir Lemminkainen. I'll need free arms if I'm to go to war."

Lemminkainen produced for each of them a skull-cap of the same thick leather, with a strip of iron around the rim and a pair of sem-circular strips that sprang from it to meet at the top of the wearer's head. These fitted better, though Brodsky's gave him the odd effect of wearing a rimless derby hat.

They climbed back into the sled. The Elk of Hiisi splashed across the little stream toward a group of buildings. Brodsky pointed:

"These Hoosiers sure play it for the works. Look at them sconces!"

Shea saw that a nearby hillock was decorated with a row of stakes—about fifty, he judged—each stake surmounted by a severed human head. The heads were in various stages of decrepitude; only one stake, at the end of the line, lacked its gruesome ornament. A score of ravens flew croaking up from the heads as they approached, and Bayard remarked:

"I'm glad there's only one vacancy."

Vuohinen said sourly: "You will soon learn how little the stakes of Pohjola are exhausted."

Lemminkainen pivoted round, hit him a solid backhand blow on the ear, and said: "Now, my friends, you shall see that the handsome Kaukomieli is not less skillful with magic than he is with the sword."

He brought the reindeer to a halt, leaped to the ground, and pulling a number of twigs from the stunted trees, began arranging them in rows, crooning to himself all the time. Presently there were enough twigs to satisfy him; he stepped back and his voice rose higher as he made a series of passes with his hands. Shea could see they were sound magic, of a type he had seen in other space-time continua, but the hero moved too rapidly for him to follow the precise pattern. Then there was a little rush of air, and where the first twig had been, Shea was looking at a replica of himself, complete with épée, leather jacket and iron-bound cap.

Another, and another and another Shea flashed into being, a whole row of Harold Sheas, who immediately began to crowd round the sled. Belphebe gave a little squeal: "Am I wed to all of these?" she cried, but as

she did so, the quota of Sheas was apparently filled up, and Belphebes began to leap from the ground where Lemminkainen had arranged his twigs. They began to mingle with the simulacra of Shea—as the magician's voice went up one more tone, and copies of Brodsky joined the growing crowd, shaking hands and clapping each other on the back.

Lemminkainen's song came to an end, and the sled was surrounded by at least a hundred replicas of the three. In it remained one Lemminkainen, one sour-looking Vuohinen and a single Bayard. This one said:

"A brilliant piece of work, Lemminkainen. But could these reproductions actually cut somebody up, or are they phantoms? They look all right to me, but I haven't tried it with beer in my eye."

"Seek to wrestle with one of these Piits, and you will see," said Lemminkainen. "They will have all the strength of life unless someone finds which is the real one and which the shadow and makes a counter-spell, using the correct name of the one."

"Wait a minute," said Bayard. "Haven't we got someone here who can identify these people for the Pohjolans?" He pointed at Vuohinen.

"By the mill!" said Lemmin-

kainen. "It is clear that I am wise as well as brave, for no one else would have thought to bring on this journey a person so capable of seeing through millstones as yourself. Piit, Härol, Pelviipi, you must mingle with your other selves, and let some of those other selves come to the sled, lest these people of Turja find the true one."

Shea stared a second, then said to Belphebe: "He's right, kid. See you later." He squeezed her hand and jumped over the side into the mob. Walter came with him. "I don't want to lose sight of the real one myself," he said.

Behind them, three or four Brodskys tried to climb into the sled at once. The one who made it first promptly kicked Vuohinen. "Get wise, punk," he said. "Pull any fast ones on me, and I'll let you have it."

Shea observed that while the various Brodskys had formed a compact group to march behind the sled, chattering with each other, most of the reproductions of himself and Belphebe had paired off. One of the unengaged ones sidled up to him and pressed his hand. It couldn't be the real one, and yet her touch was as cool and her step as light as though it were. It occurred to him that unless someone pronounced the counter-spell fairly

soon, some neat marital problems would arise in a continuum that contained about thirty-five Sheas and as many Belphebes, all presumably supplied with the due quota of emotions.

Bayard said: "There's one point, Harold. It seems to me that it should be possible to tell within easily determinable limits how our presence here will affect the outcome of the epic. We have all the elements. We know what happened in the original story, and we have fairly accurate information about ourselves. It seems to me that an equation could be set up—"

"Yeah, for one of those electronic thinking machines," said Shea. "Only we don't happen to have one, and if we did, it wouldn't work."

"There was a witch once in Faerie," said the Belphebe by his side, "that warned people from danger after she had looked in a pool by magic and seen to where a course would lead."

"That's what I mean," said Bayard. "Apparently you can do things by magic in this continuum that a calculating machine couldn't think of equalling. Now if before we start something—say going into that hall there—we found out it was going to turn out badly, then we could change it to the right kind of

future by taking another action."

"That's a bum steer," said one of the Brodskys, who had fallen into step with them. "Get smart, will you? Everything that's gonna happen has been put on the line by God ever since the clock began to tick. It says so in the Bible."

"Listen, my predestinarian friend," said Bayard, "I will be glad to prove the contrary . . ."

"Not with magic, you won't," said Shea. "You're the only one it doesn't affect now, and if you got to working spells, you might lose your immunity. Hey, they've spotted us."

A man was running, shouting, toward one of the buildings from which came sounds of revelry. The door of this building opened as the sled came to a stop, and several broad, black-bearded faces appeared in the opening. Shea saw one of the other Sheas put an arm around a Belphebe and felt a quite illogical pang of jealousy over the thought that this might be the real one.

Lemminkainen jumped out of the sled, followed by a Shea, a Belphebe and a Brodsky, who clamped a wrist-lock on Vuohinen. Men began to file out of the hall and stand opposite the company of visitors, who drew up in a rough line. They looked

much like other Kalevalans, though perhaps even shorter and with more Mongoloid faces. They were armed and looked thoroughly unpleasant. Shea felt a prickling at the back of his neck and loosened his épée in its scabbard.

But Lemminkainen looked unimpressed. "Hail, my cousins of Pohjola!" he said. "Do you wish to keep me standing here outside the hall of feasting?"

Nobody answered him; instead, more of them came frowning out. Lemminkainen turned.

"Fair Pelviipi," he said, "show them your art, that they may learn how silly it is to oppose the friends of the heroic Kaukomieli."

As though actuated by a single brain, thirty-five Belphebes placed one foot each against the ends of their bows and snapped the strings into place. Like so many Rockettes, they each placed an arrow on the string, took one pace back, and looked around for a target. One of the ravens from the palisade of heads chose that moment to come flapping over, with a loud "Kr-awk."

Thirty-five bowstrings twanged; the raven came tumbling downward, looking like a pin-cushion, transfixed by all the arrows that could find room in its carcass. "Nice work, kid," said

Shea, before he realized he was talking to a simulacrum.

It impressed the Pohjolans, too. There was a quick, low-toned gabbling among them, and a couple disappeared inside. In a moment they were back and the company began to disappear through the door. Lemminkainen said: "Follow me!" and stamped up behind them. Shea hurried, not wishing to be left outside, and reached the door simultaneously with the Shea who had been in the sled.

"Sorry," said the other Shea, "but I came here to go to this party with my wife."

"She's my wife, too," said Shea, grabbing a Belphebe at random and leading her through the door behind the other couple. Thank Heaven, there were enough of them to go around.

Inside several rush-lights flickered and a fire blazed on the central hearth, to some extent counteracting the inadequate illumination characteristic of Kalevalan houses. The whole long hall was crowded with benches and tables, at which sat scores of men and quite a few women. All heads were turned toward the newcomers.

Shea's eyes followed Lemminkainen's toward the center of the hall, where a table with some space about it was apparently the place of honor. At it sat the

tallest Kalevalan Shea had ever seen; this was undoubtedly the bridegroom. There was a sharp-featured, snag-toothed, muscular-looking woman—Louhi, the Mistress of Pohjola, no doubt. The stout man with his eyes drooping sleepily and a mug of drink before him must be the Master of Pohjola. The girl with the fancy beaded headdress was probably the bride, Louhi's daughter.

The duplicate Shea touched him on the arm. "Even nicer dish than Kylliki, isn't she?" he whispered. It was odd to have one's own thoughts come back at one out of one's own mouth.

Lemminkainen strode to the nearest bench, reached out and pitched the last man on it to the floor. Then he slammed his muddy boot down on the bench and shouted:

"Greetings to ye on my coming,
Greetings also to the greeter!
Hearken, Pohjola's great
Master,
Have you here within this
dwelling,
Beer to offer to the hero?"

Louhi dug her elbow into her husband's ribs. He forced his eyes open, gave a grunt and replied:

"If you care to stand quietly over there in the corner, between

the kettles, where the hoes are hanging, we will not prevent you."

Lemminkainen laughed, but it was an angry laugh. "Seems to me that I'm unwelcome," he chanted:

"As no ale is offered to me,
To the guest who has just
entered."

"No guest you," cried Louhi, "but a trouble-making boy, not fit to sit among your elders. Well, if you seek trouble, by Ukko, you shall find it!"

"Yes?" said Lemminkainen, sitting down heavily on the bench.

"Pohjola's illustrious Mistress,
Long-toothed Mistress of
Pimentola,
You have held the wedding
badly,
And in doggish fashion held
it . . ."

He chanted on, comparing Louhi to various species of unpleasant fauna and extending the compliments to most of her guests. There seemed to be a routine about this sort of thing, Shea decided; the others merely sat, waiting till Lemminkainen had finished. Behind him he heard the duplicate Shea say to Bayard:

"All right, I admit it might work, and it's within the laws of magic. But if anybody's going to try it, you better let me. You just haven't had enough experience with it, Walter."

He whirled. "What might work?"

His twin said: "Walter's been watching Lemminkainen, and thinks he's worked out a magical method for determining the future results of a given series of events."

"I just want to show up this predestination business for—" began Bayard.

"Sssh," said the duplicate Shea. "They've finished saying hello. Here comes the floor show."

The Master of Pohjola had at last opened his eyes fully, and was chanting a spell. In the space between the table of honor, and the hearth, there appeared a pool of water. The Master cried:

"Here's a river you may drink
of,
Here's a pool that you may
splash in!"

"Ha, ha!" bellowed Lemminkainen.

"I'm no calf by women driven,
Nor a bull with tail behind me,
That I drink of river-water,

Or of filthy ponds the water."

His tone went lower, and without apparent effort he sang up an enormous ox, under whose hooves the floor creaked alarmingly. The ox, after a vague look around the company, began schlooping up the water by the bucketful.

Shea said to his Belphebe: "Probably brought up in somebody's parlor, so he doesn't think a thing about it."

The Master of Pohjola was already at work on a new spell. Its result was a great gray wolf, which took one look at the ox and bounded toward it. The ox gave a bawl of terror, whirled and thundered toward the door, while the Pohjolans fell over one another to get out of the way. It plunged through, taking part of the door-frame with it, and vanished, with the wolf right behind.

Louhi sneered. "You are vanquished in the contest of magic, O Kaukomieli! Now begone, before worse comes on you."

"No man who deserves the name would let himself be driven from any place where he chose to stay," said Lemminkainen, "least of all a hero like myself. I challenge."

The Master stood up. He moved surprisingly lightly for

so beefy an individual. "Let us then measure our swords together to see which is the better."

Lemminkainen grinned and drew his broadsword. "Little of my sword is left me, for on bones it has been shattered. But come, let us measure them."

The Master crossed over to the wall and took his sword from a peg. The Belphebe next to Shea said: "Shall I notch a shaft?"

"I don't think so," he replied. "It's not likely to turn into a general riot unless somebody breaks the rules. They're too nervous about those bows."

The contenders were measuring their swords in the cleared space. From where he stood, it seemed to Shea that the Master's was a trifle longer. The guests crowded forward to watch the fun, while those behind yelled to them to sit down. At last the Master ordered them back to their seats.

"And you newcomers, too!" he shouted. "Back against the wall!"

That seemed to remind Lemminkainen of something. He said: "Before that we work out our challenge, I will challenge any present—to the point-sword against my companion Härol, or to the wrestle with my companion Piit. It will be rare sport to

watch, after I have disposed of you."

The duplicate Shea said: "Isn't he generous?" But one of the Belphebes put her hand on his arm and he felt better.

"You will be watching no more sports," said the Master. "Are you ready?"

"I am ready," said Lemminkainen.

The Master leaped forward, swinging his sword up for a tremendous overhand cut, as if he were serving a tennis ball. The blow was never completed, however, for the swordblade struck a rafter overhead with a loud chunk. Lemminkainen made a pass at his opponent, who leaped backward with wonderful agility. Lemminkainen roared with laughter, saying:

"What has the rafter done to you, that you should punish it? But that is always the way with little men when confronted by a true hero. Come, there's too little room in here. And do you not think that your blood would look prettier on the grass outside?"

He turned and shouldered his way toward the door. As Shea followed him, Lemminkainen leaned close and, with his foxy expression, whispered:

"I think that some of them are false seemings. Let your friend Payart watch sharply."

Before Shea could reply, the others were coming. Outside the phantom company were sitting or standing on the grass, talking. Shea wondered whether, when the spell came off, he would find himself remembering what the others had said. He wished he had Doc Chalmers around; there were times when this magic business got pretty complicated for an incomplete enchanter.

The Master and Lemminkainen halted in the yard, between the main house and the hillock with its head-decorated row of stakes. A couple of serfs brought a big cowhide, which they laid on the grass to provide securer footing. Lemminkainen took his stance at one edge of it, stamping his feet to test the give of the hide. He jerked his thumb toward the heads, saying:

"When we finish that last stake will no longer feel ashamed of its nakedness. Are you ready?"

"I am ready," said the Master of Pohjola.

Shea glanced at his companions. The version of Belphebe nearest him was watching with an intent, studious expression that showed duels were nothing particular new to her. One of the Brodskys said:

"Shea, this may be for the monkeys, but these birds are no flukers. If we could make TV

with this show, there'd be enough scratch in it to—"

"Sh!" said Bayard. "I'm concentrating."

Clang! went the blades, the Master of Pohjola forcing the attack. His longer blade flashed overhead, forehand, backhand. "Wonderful wrists," said one of the phantom Sheas. Lemminkainen, not giving an inch, was parrying every swing. There was little footwork in this style of sword-play; they faced each other squarely, hewing as if trying to fell trees, pausing occasionally for a rest, feinting, and then slashing away again.

Once the Master's blade came down on Lemminkainen's shoulder, but at a slight angle, so that the scale-mail slipped the blow aside. Then Lemminkainen got in a cut at the Master's neck that the latter did not quite parry in time. Blood trickled from a cut.

"Ho, ho!" cried Lemminkainen. "Hearken, Master of Pohjola, true it is, your neck so wretched is as red as dawn of morning!"

The Master, stepping back half a pace, rolled his eyes downward for a fraction of a second as though to assess the damage. Instantly Lemminkainen, advancing so fast that Shea could not quite see how he did it, struck again. The blade went

right through the Master's neck. The head, turning over in the air, fell in a graceful parabola, and the body, half-twisting as the legs buckled under it, fell spouting upon the cowhide. There was a rasping groan from the crowd. Louhi shrieked.

Lemminkainen, grinning until it seemed as though his mouth must meet behind, like Humpty-Dumpty's, cried: "So much for the heroes of Pohjola!"

He stepped forward, wiped his blade with care on the trousers of the corpse, and sheathed it. Then he picked up the head and strutted to the empty stake.

"Now, wicked wretches, fetch me beer!" he bellowed. Shea turned to say something to the nearest Belphebe. It was not until that moment that he remembered Bayard had said: "*I'm concentrating.*" He turned around and looked. Sure enough, there was Bayard, his back to the arresting spectacle of Lemminkainen's victory march, crouched on the ground over a little pile of grasses. He seemed to be muttering to himself; a tiny curl of smoke came from the pile.

"Walter, no!" shouted Shea, and dived for him.

Too late.

There was a little flash of fire, a sound of displaced air, and in

an instant all the duplicate Sheas, Belphebes and Brodskys had vanished. As Shea and Bayard rolled over together, they heard Lemminkainen's shout:

"Fool! Bungler! Traitor! Your spell has cancelled mine. The agreement is ended!"

Shea pulled himself to his knees in time to see the hero walking, not running, toward the sled with his sword out. Nobody seemed anxious to be the first to stop him.

Down toward the edge of what had been the Pohjolan cheering section around the combatants, there was a half-muffled cry, and out of a struggling group projected a leg, dainty even in the shapeless garment.

"Belphebe!" he shouted, getting to his feet and tugging at his sword with the same motion, but before he could get the épée out of its scabbard, he too went down under a swarm of bodies. He had just time to notice that they didn't bathe often enough and that Brodsky had laid out one of the assailants with a neat crack of his black-jack, and then he was hopelessly pinioned, being marched along beside Bayard.

"Put them in the strong-house!" said the Mistress of Pohjola. Her face did not look as though she intended it to be

a place of entertainment.

As the captives were frog-marched along, Shea saw the Elk of Hiisi retreating into the distance, with the sled bouncing along behind him.

VIII

The four were tumbled unceremoniously over each other onto a stone floor, heard a massive door slam and the clash as several large bolts were driven home behind them. Shea got up and pulled Belphebe to her feet.

"Are you hurt, kid?" he asked.

"Nay, not I." She rubbed one wrist where someone's grip had come down hard. "But there are places I would rather be."

"It's a real jook-joint, all right," said Brodsky. "You got me on how we're going to push a can from this one."

He was looking around the place in the dim illumination furnished by the single, eight-inch window, which was heavily barred. The strong-house itself was composed of massive tree-trunks and its roof seemed abnormally thick.

"Alackaday," said Belphebe. "What happened to those shapings of ourselves that so confounded these gentry but lately?"

"Walter took care of that," said Shea. "I admit I'm just as

glad to have only one wife, but he was a little precipitate. What in hell were you up to, Walter?"

Bayard said: "I was merely trying in a small way to carry out the plan I mentioned of divining the future. It worked, too."

"What do you mean, it worked?" said Shea.

"I was trying to find out who would win the duel. There were little fiery letters on the ground that said 'Lem' as clearly as could be."

"A big help," said Shea, "especially as he took off the other guy's head about that time, anyway."

Bayard said: "The principle is established. And how was I to know it would counteract Lemminkainen's spell? Nobody warned me of any such outcome. What is the logical nexus between the two, by the way?"

Shea shrugged. "I haven't the least idea. Maybe we can work it out some time when we have the leisure. But in the meanwhile, we need to figure out some plan for getting out of here. These people don't fool around at any time, and that old witch has just lost her husband."

He went to the little window and looked out. Or tried to, for he found his vision blocked by a familiar-looking bewhiskered countenance: Vuohinen, who

spat through the bars at him.

Shea dodged, wiped his shoulder with the cuff of the other hand, and turned to Brodsky. "Pete, he's your serf. Maybe you can order him—"

"Ha!" roared Vuohinen. "This one to order me? I am free of all serfdom now, and have been charged to see that you outlandish tricksters do not escape before the Mistress of Pohjola undertakes your punishment."

"What do you mean?"

"All details I do not know, but be assured it will be a memorable occasion. She is like to have you flayed and rolled in salt, to be followed by slow burning."

Shea fell back and looked around. Whoever had planned this box had built for keeps. The massive simplicity of the structure would defy any amount of tinkering. For instance, there was no opening whatever on the inside of the door through which one could get at the outside.

"I know your names!" shouted Vuohinen from the window. "Your wizardries will have no power on me."

He was probably right, at that. But an idea occurred to Shea. He returned to the window. "Look here," he said. "I'm a champion and I challenge you."

Vuohinen shook his head. "I am no longer a champion myself since losing the wrestle to this

Piit, and cannot take your challenge until he has been beheaded."

"Wait a minute," said Bayard, "if—"

"Ya!" said Vuohinen. "I see your plot. Be known that I shall take care that your head comes off first, and his the last of all." He turned his back and walked away from the window.

Shea turned to Brodsky. "Pete, you should know a lot about busting out of places like this. What do the chances look like to you?"

Brodsky, who had been moving slowly around the cell, poking and testing, shook his head. "This is a real tough can. It would be a soup job, and even then there'd be the strong-arm squad out there to play."

Bayard said: "Couldn't we lure Vuohinen up to the bars and then grab him and choke him?"

"No good," said Brodsky. "What do you get except a good feeling in your biscuit? He ain't got no keys."

Belphebe said: "Yet while you are an approved sorcerer, Harold, it seems to me that we are not utterly without resource." She took her turn at stepping to the window. "Ohé, Vuohinen," she called.

"What now, female toad?"

"I understand how you are angry with us. We were lacking

in sympathy, in not thinking of the damage to your hand. But we will make amends. If you will tell us somewhat of yourself, my lord, who knows no little magic, will make it good for you."

Shea squeezed her hand. "Nice try, kid," he said under his breath. But Vuohinen saw the point, too.

"And put myself in his power? Ya, the hand will heal itself quickly enough when I see your heads on stakes."

Shea took over with: "You're a pretty tough guy, aren't you?"

"That I am."

"Yes, sir," said Shea. "Some of them are good where I come from, but for plain toughness, I'm afraid we're not in your class. Must be the diet or something. How did you get that way, anyway?"

"Ya," said Vuohinen, "you seek by flattery to disarm me, so that you may persuade me to let you go. I am not so simple."

Bayard said: "He seems to be up on psychology, too, doesn't he?"

Shea sighed. "Psychology worked in the world of Norse myth when I got thrown in the jug."

"The trouble seems to be," said Bayard, "that this animal is a Finn. In our own world the Finns are about the stubbornest race

on earth, like the Dutch and maybe the Basques. There's something in the culture-pattern. I don't think you're going to get anywhere with him . . . I wonder how much time we have left?"

Belphebe said: "Harold, my love, I think the answer stares us in the face, but we have so looked at small details as to miss the great. Why cannot we leave this whole world of Kalevala by the same door we entered in: item, your symbolic magic?"

Shea slapped his thigh. "Just the thing! Wait a minute, though . . . Any kind of magic in this continuum takes a lot of music, and I guess my voice just isn't equal to it. That's why I've had trouble so far."

"Alas, I fear I can do but little more for you," said Belphebe. "Not that I croak like you, my love, but my voice is so slender. I could attune a harp if we had such a thing; Timias, my fiancé in Faerie, taught me the art."

Bayard shook his head. Brodsky said: "Not that I want to noise off, but if my schnozz was on the up-and-up . . ."

Shea said: "Wait a minute here. I think I see a way. Have you ever had that polyp taken out, Pete?"

"Naw."

"Why not?"

"I been busy . . . And besides,

I don't want no croaker putting me through the mill." His voice was defensive, but Shea rushed on:

"Well, why don't we begin by curing your polyp by magic? That ought not to take much of a spell, and if your voice were working right, we could tackle something harder."

"Say, maybe you got a right steer there. But how are you going to wrap it up without music?"

"I think that Belphebe's voice with the help of a harp ought to be enough for the smaller spell. Then she could accompany you, and I'll work out the big one. Wait, I'll try."

He stepped to the window again, "Oh, Vuohinen!"

"Well, what now?"

"Do you know what a kantele is?"

"What child does not?"

"Good. Could you get us one to lighten our last hours?"

"Why should I lighten your last hours, filth?" He turned away again.

Shea sighed again. "No cooperation; that's the trouble with this damned continuum," he said.

Bayard asked: "What's a kantele?"

"The primitive harp. Väinämöinen invented it at some point in the runes, by making it out of

a fish's jawbone, but I wasn't sure he'd done it yet, so I asked this guy if he knew what it was."

"If we had a fish's jawbone—"

"We could make one ourselves. Yes, I know. But our chances of getting a fish's jawbone out of that big lump of insensitivity are about as good as those of biting our way through those logs."

"I can fix that," said Brodsky, suddenly.

"Oh, yeah?" said Shea, and "Can you, indeed?" said Bayard, both together.

"Oh, yeah," said Brodsky firmly, and strode to the window again. "Hey, lug!" he called. "So you're going to clip our pumpkins tomorrow. Okay. But where's the kiss-off banquet?"

"What use is food to you, who will so soon be beyond the need of it?"

"That's right, play it dumb, lug. Listen, we're from Ohio, see? In our country, when a ghee doesn't get what he wants for his last meal, his ghost comes back on the roach that turned him down, and pretty soon the muzzler is playing with the squirrels."

"It is a lie," said Vuohinen, but he turned his head from side to side to look at the others, and Shea felt his heart leap. He nodded solemnly in support of the

detective. "That's right," said Bayard.

"Boy!" said Brodsky gleefully. "Am I going to get a bang out of watching you cut off your own toes?"

"Maybe we could make him take off his nose and ears, too, while we're about it," said Shea.

"That's the dope," Brodsky continued. "None of them fried pigs' ears, either. It's gotta be fish, or else."

The head disappeared. Shea turned to Brodsky. "You're a better psychologist than I am. How did you know that would fetch him?"

"Ah, I never saw the gorilla yet that didn't fall for the yudd racket," said Brodsky, modestly. "They're so afraid of going wack, they'd rather turn themselves in."

He seemed to have struck oil. Outside there was the sound of feet and a murmur of voices. Then there was a wait, the bolts were drawn back, and the door opened to show Vuohinen, surrounded by a phalanx of the black-bearded Pohjolan warriors. He bore a big wooden platter.

"I told the Mistress of your outlandish custom," he said, "and though she says her magic is strong for any protection, she will grant you so much."

He slammed down the platter and stamped out. Shea bent to

examine the platter. There was no doubt that it was fish, and more than a little on the high side, some large member of the salmon tribe. He said:

"Well, here's our harp. Walter, help me get the jaw-bones out of this critter's head."

"What with? They took all our knives and things."

"With your fingernails. We can't be squeamish. Shh, let me think. I'll have to work out the verse for Belphebe."

"Now," said Shea, "can you break off a few hairs, sweet-heart?"

Belphebe complied. Shea undertook to tie the strands of hair, one at a time, to the jawbone, so that they spanned its gap like the strings of a harp. In the dim light, it took some doing.

She touched the strings and bent her head close. "It's awfully small and weak," she said. "I don't know—"

"I thought of that," said Shea. "Listen carefully, kid, and memorize after me, because you'll have to do it all yourself. Keep your voice way down, as though you were crooning, to match the harp. I'll make the passes, just to be on the safe side, though they may not be necessary."

Belphebe seated herself on the floor, with the harp on her up-lifted knees, cocked her ear down toward it, and began:

"Oh, you harp of fish's jawbone,
Hail, you kantele of magic . . ."

while Shea ran rapidly through some of the passes he had used in Faerie. She was from there, and it would probably help. Belphebe ended.

". . . be you forthwith ten times greater."

And fell over on her back as a five-foot harp of fish's jawbone pushed her off balance. Shea helped her up, and she began testing the strings. "It needs tuning," she said.

"All right, you tune it, while I work out a verse for that polyp. Pete, what's the name of your wife, and what church do you go to?"

In a few moments they were ready. Pete placed himself before the couple, Belphebe twanged the strings of her harp, and in her light, clear soprano sang the spell for the removal of the polyp. Brodsky cried:

"Ouch! Damn near took my scone off." He felt his nose and a smile spread across his face in the semi-darkness. (Outside the summer day was just ending.) "Say, Shea—"

Whatever he was going to say was never said. The window turned dark, and all four looked

up to see Vuohinen's face peering in, bearded and furious.

"Where did you get that?" he shouted. "Magic! Magic! I know your names! I will—" The face abruptly disappeared.

"Sing!" cried Shea to Brodsky. "Sing anything you can think of! Quick! I'll take care of the sorites. Belphebe, you accompany him, and Walter hold one of his hands. Now if the class A—"

Pete Brodsky tilted his head back, and in a tenor that would have done credit to John McCormack, burst into:

"My wi-ild I-rish rose,
The swe-etest flower that
grows . . ."

Outside, beneath the piercing tenor and the twanging of the harp, there was a sound of distant shouting and running feet.

"You may look everywhere—"

Shea could feel a tension in the air, but whether from their own magic or that of Vuohinen's counter-charms, he couldn't guess. He was working up a fine sweat, while Brodsky's voice

rose up and up, liltily.

It had to work. Shea didn't care where the spell took them, so long as they got free of this world, and fast. He'd accomplished all he came for. He'd freed Bayard and Brodsky from Xanadu, one way or another. Now if they could get out of here, everything would be all right.

Put him down in any other world—one where magic didn't depend on the ability to sing when he couldn't carry a tune—and he was sure he could take care of just about anything that might come up, and get them all home eventually.

Brodsky was reaching the end of the song—and still nothing had happened.

Then he hit the final note, just as Shea finished his sorites. There was a sudden wrenching.

The walls of the cabin seemed to turn around and around as though they were on a pivot and only the four in the center fixed in position. And as Pete's voice rose higher and higher, the solid walls turned gray and dissolved and with them the whole world of the Kalevala.

THE WEEBLIES

BY ALGIS BUDRYS

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

Officer Czypulzinski had the honor of seeing the first Weebly, but he wasn't elated. One might say he was practically perturbed. Weeblys, of course, have one singular characteristic. On the least provocation, they weebly.

The first Weebly became conscious of its existence in the middle of a deep layer of carboniferous matter. If it had possessed hands, it would have scratched its head, except that its head was so located as to be inaccessible to its hands, if it had had any. Being a more or less empirical thinker, however, and never having heard of Descartes, the first Weebly would have spat on its hands, conditions permitting, kicked out vigorously, and proceeded to work its way upward.

It came to a layer of striated igneous rock, and paused to weebly the first weebly.

The two Weeblys continued on their journey until they reached oil-bearing shale. They weebly.

Upward and onward went the

four Weeblys. They found a pocket of coral limestone and weebly.

The eight Weeblys moved upward unhesitatingly. They reached sand, and weebly.

Limestone again. Weebly.

Oil pocket. Weebly.

Coal. Weebly.

Granite. Weebly. Weebly, weebly, *weebly!*

Fifty thousand Weeblys burst out of the ground just east of Dorothy, New Jersey, and continued to weebly.

In a top-secret government laboratory, Robert Herrick stepped away from his handiwork and lit a cork-tipped cigarette on the wrong end. He frowned, coughed the smoke out of his lungs, shrugged, and philosophically



continued to puff on the cigarette. He ran his ragged fingertips through his hair and regarded the apparatus with a distrustful eye.

"Hmm," he said. He cracked his knuckles and scratched his nose. "Ha," he said.

He walked over to his locker and took out a copy of "Peace of Soul." He flipped through the pages, searching the paragraphs with bemused attentiveness. After a time he put the volume back, and resumed his former inspection of the hulking jumble of tubes, wires, and bus bars that barricaded one end of the room. "Ah, the hell with it!" he said, and stamped out the cigarette.

He picked up a PBX phone and started to dial a number, then looked at his wrist watch. "Jesus! Oh-three hundred!" he said, and dropped the receiver back on the cutoff button. He thought for a moment, then picked up the phone again and dialed for an outside line. In due course, he was connected with a number in the small town nearest the laboratory.

"Hello?" a low and friendly voice answered.

"Uh—Miss Hunicutt, is General Southey there? This is Robert Herrick," he said with some embarrassment.

"I'll call him," the same sweet voice answered.

Herrick couldn't be blamed for sighing at the contrast as a gruff military tone superseded Miss Hunicutt's. He winced a bit as General Southey barked, "Well, Herrick, it better be good!"

"Yes, sir. It is. That is, I've got something, at last.

"What? Impossible! Why, you haven't even spent a billion dollars yet!"

"I know, General. I'm sorry. There's a lot of development ahead, anyway," he said hastily.

"Ah right! Now then, what have you got?" the general said, mollified. After all, completion of the project meant a new assignment, almost certainly to a job where Miss Hunicutt could not follow.

"Well, I've succeeded in manufacturing the primary effect my theories indicated, but it's not very selective. In fact," he said, "it's not selective at all."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Both, I think."

"What kind of an answer is that? You scientists are always hedging!" the general said with asperity. "Oh, double-dash it! Wait for me at the lab! I'll be right over and take a look for myself!"

"Yes, sir," Herrick said unhappily. "I hope I'm not incon-

veniencing you too much, sir." His only answer was a slam of the receiver as the general left Miss Hunicutt's apartment in high dudgeon.

Weeble!

Officer Czypulzinski of Traffic A in the City of New York looked down at the asphalt of his personal intersection. The Weeble looked back at the officer. And since a Weeble's head is somewhat unconventionally located, the effect was rather *outré*.

Weeble!

Officer Czypulzinski took his Positive out of its holster.

Weeble! Followed by many weebles.

The officer replaced his weapon and walked to his call box with deliberate, if somewhat uneven, steps. His brow was carefully unknit. It was only when he picked up the phone that he began to cry, the bitter tears rolling down his cheeks. It had been a good, satisfying, twenty-eight years on the Force. It broke his heart to have to report himself unfit for further duty.

General Southey strode into Herrick's laboratory. He advanced to the wall of equipment and stood looking at it. Herrick stood beside him, casting nervous glances at the bristling figure.

"Well, Herrick?" the general said.

"Yes, sir. That is, I'll show you, sir," Herrick said.

"Well, hurry up, man!" The general swung his swagger stick against his cavalry boots.

"As you know, sir," Robert said as he crossed over to a mouse cage and removed a sleepy rodent, "I've been working on Blitzer's application of Dammermacher's Postulations. It was my theory that a wave could be produced which would inhibit the electrochemical activities of the human central nervous system."

"Of course!" the general said.

"I was wrong, however," Herrick said, dragging a model of the full-size apparatus out from under a bench. "Apparently, I either failed to interpret Blitzer's brilliant work correctly or else the poor slob was drunk and didn't know what he was doing himself. At any rate, the results, which should have been of the coma-inducing type, are fatal instead. Like this."

He popped the mouse into a glass cage, and then slid a movable grid over the enclosure. "This grid will confine the effect to the cage," he explained. "Now. I push this button, and—" The mouse rolled over on its back and entered a cat-free Nirvana.

The general's eyes pushed

against their lids. "It's dead? You're sure?"

Herrick regarded his expression with distaste. "Quite." He pointed at the full-size instruments. "The large model is capable of broadcasting a wave which will reflect from the Heaviside layer, and will consequently blanket this entire planet."

"Think of that!" the general said. Then he jumped, thunderstruck. "Gad, man! This solves the Russian problem! Will the big model work? Of course it will, or you wouldn't have called me. Turn it on! Turn it on, Herrick! We'll get the Medal of Honor for this!" He ran around in a small circle, swishing at the air with his swagger stick. "Medal of Honor?" he muttered. "Medal of Honor nothing! By the ethylated ghost of U. S. Grant, *this is an election year!*" he exclaimed.

Herrick shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry, general, but it wouldn't work."

"Wouldn't work! What do you mean, it wouldn't work? You controlled it when you killed that mouse, didn't you? Tune it in for Russians, and turn it on! What could be simpler?"

"It could be done, of course," Herrick said. "But the Russians might wonder why we were building a grid enclosing their

country. No, I'm afraid that, as it stands, the transmitter will kill everybody on Earth. With the exception of me, of course," he added.

"You! What's different about you?" the general said, apoplectically.

"I'd have to operate the machine, of course. The switch and power controls are located in the center of the transmitting coils. Ergo, the wave will reach everywhere but there."

"By God, Herrick, this smacks of rank cowardice!"

"I'm sorry, sir. I should have some progress toward a beam transmitter, at least, by next year. I hope that'll be good enough."

"It damn well better be, Herrick, it damn well better be! All right! I'm going back to bed! You'd better get some sleep too, boy! You look very agitated boy, very agitated! Is something bothering you?" the general said, and strode out the door without waiting for an answer.

Burns pulled the sheet out of the teletype. He crushed a cigarette into the already well-nicotined boards of the newsroom floor and carried the bulletin over to his typewriter. He rolled in a sheet of copy paper and began to construct a lead for a new story.

"Weebly menace to force evacuation of Eastern Seaboard if unchecked, President says before Joint Session

"Unless some method of killing these monsters is found," the Chief Executive averred today in an unprecedented emergency session which called many legislators away from their pre-election campaigns, "we will find ourselves swamped by these—uh—animals."

Burns considered this journalistic gem, shook his head, and tore it up. He had a hard enough time believing that people in New York could no longer walk the streets without treading on a constantly weebly carpet of Weeblies. How was he ever going to convince his hard-bitten fellow Chicagoans? He gave up in disgust and decided to let the press association bulletin go as was. He got up and went to the water cooler.

Where the hell was everybody tonight? Night editing was bad enough without the added handicap of a missing staff. As he raised the paper cup to his lips, the lights went out.

"What the hell?" he said. At the same instant, there was a sound of breaking glass that came simultaneously from each of the windows. He spun around.

The Weeblies came pouring into the room, weebly as they came.

The television mast of the Empire State Building protruded from a sea, as did the Chicago *Tribune* tower. Somewhere under this new sea, the old Atlantic ran, and far to the east the gilded onions of the Kremlin broke off under the mounting pressure. The sea weebly, and increased.

New Mexico had yet to see its first Weebly. Herrick, had that much to comfort him, and little else, for he was sorely preoccupied. He threw a screwdriver to the floor with a vicious swing of his arm and listened to the bounce with some satisfaction.

General Southey looked up from his seat on a bench. "Don't tell me you're giving up, man?" he barked.

"Look, let's face it, General, I can't turn this thing into a beam transmitter in the short time we've got left, much less 'tune it to Weeblies.' I appreciate the fact that if we don't get somewhere soon, we might as well not bother, but I wouldn't depend on the transmitter to be any help," Herrick said.

"Nonsense! You're not even trying!" the general barked. "Damn it, Herrick, I'm begin-

ning to suspect you're a Red!"

"You leave Bobbie alone!" Miss Hunicutt blazed from her corner. "He's trying his best, while the two of us are just getting in his way."

Herrick smiled at her gratefully. Miss Hunicutt was not only of the stuff that dreams are made of, she was obviously of a high order of intelligence. He sighed in silent admiration as she ignored Southey's poisonous look.

"I suppose you'd rather be back in town, where the Weeblies might start popping out of the ground at any moment?" the general said testily.

"Never mind where I'm supposed to be," she replied with asperity. "Where are *you* supposed to be, if not with the Army, trying to do something about those *things*?"

"I told you before, and you both know it anyway, that there's nothing you *can* do to Weeblies," the general replied. "If you kill some of them, the rest just—uh—weeble harder to make up for the loss. Herrick's invention is our last hope, and we're not getting anywhere with that."

"Well, if Bobbie's sure he can't change it in time, there's only one thing left to do, then," Miss Hunicutt said firmly.

"What?" said the general. Herrick raised his eyebrows.

"Bobbie'll just have to turn on the machine as it is," she said.

"Have you gone mad? That would kill *everybody*, human and Weebly!" the general cried.

"Would you rather suffocate and be crushed to death by the Weeblies?" Miss Hunicutt said with unassailable logic. "I wouldn't. As long as there's no hope, we might as well die quickly."

The general looked at her narrowly. "You know," he said, "I *thought* there was something suspicious about you turning up in town just as the project got started." He pulled his service automatic out of its holster. "You're a Communist agent!" he yelled, and drew a bead on Miss Hunicutt, who stepped back and gave a little cry of alarm.

The cry penetrated to Robert's heart. With a lithe motion, he picked up a fairly heavy hammer and threw it at the general. There was a dull *thunk*, and General Southey sank to the floor, bouncing his already contused head. Herrick stood over him, breathing deeply in satisfaction. "Now, why didn't I think of that before?" he said.

Miss Hunicutt flew into his arms. "Oh, Bobbie, you're so *forceful*," she murmured against his chest.

"There, there, it's all right," he said, patting her head. He looked over her shoulder through a window that overlooked the plain outside. He froze.

"Weebles!" he said. Miss Hunicutt swung around in his arms.

Out on the plain, the weebles began.

"Come on!" Robert shouted, and pulled Miss Hunicutt after him.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Turn the transmitter on," he said, pushing her into the small control cubicle at the center of the machine.

"But we'll die!" Miss Hunicutt exclaimed. "There won't be any danger for a while, anyway. I don't want to die, not now," she said, plucking at his sleeve with downcast eyes.

Robert gulped, but kept his

head. "We'll be all right. The field can't reach us here, as long as we stay in the control cubicle," he explained.

"Will there be enough room?" Miss Hunicutt asked.

"There will be if we stand close together."

Naturally, then, he kept his hand on the switch far longer than necessary.

The weebles had stopped. They emerged into a quiet world.

Robert took Miss Hunicutt's hand. "We are the last two people alive," he said quietly. "The new Adam and Eve," he said rapturously. "We'll build a new world," he said a little later.

"Oh yes, Robert, a new world," Miss Hunicutt said. "The old one was such a *nasty* place, all full of Weebles and *humans*."

Robert stared at her.

Miss Hunicutt smiled. She bled.

Sometimes it's difficult to draw the line between science fiction and fantasy. Usually, they're entirely different; fantasy depends on the reader being willing to fool himself during the story and believe in what he knows is impossible; science fiction depends on the author being able to fool the reader during the story into believing what he thinks may be possible.

The blend of the two is seldom achieved deliberately. But once in a while, a story written as one or the other shades over the line. Fritch and Budrys in this issue have both had such stories. We're frankly curious about your reactions to this type of story. Drop a postcard, won't you?



EMISSARY

BY CHARLES E. FRITCH

ILLUSTRATED BY EBERLE

In the still of night, they came across the hills from places that still shimmered with a strange, unrelenting fire. They were the monsters, the new mutations—but somehow they were old...old....

Night came to the valley as it always did, slowly, almost reluctantly, with the pale glow of twilight lingering beyond the bristling mountain like some giant radioactive jewel half con-



cealed. The light faded perceptibly and darkness crept forward on silent feet, while across the valley came the hushed frantic whispers and the hurried slamming of doors and the bolting of locks that came and echoed with every night. Doors stayed open briefly, though the night was warm, and the cabin lights blinked their neon eyes through the openings to stare sightlessly into darkness until, one by one, they winked out as the doors shut upon them like closing eyelids.

John Corlan stood at his doorway and stared into the deepening night, watching the lights dancing in the warm air like bewildered fireflies and then disappear, not to return. He peered intently into the gloom, trying to see what distant shapes moved stealthily among the tall trees, and was glad he saw no movement. The wind felt of his hair with cold fingers, and he shivered, holding the metal door tighter so he might slam it shut if need be. He stood there silently until all other lights had gone, and his own cabin light behind him cast a golden-rimmed shadow into the world of night.

"What's out there," he wondered, half-aloud, and he clenched his fists helplessly and blinked and strained his eyes to see what secret lay covered by

darkness. The breeze swept murmuring through the bushes, and he trembled and wondered if it were only the night wind that chilled him. But he saw nothing except the gray shapes of trees swaying against the night sky.

He heard a movement behind him, a soft touch at his shoulder, and a quiet, feminine voice saying, "Close the door, John, please." Her voice was not tinged with fear, bearing only the element of practical necessity. It was as though she had said, "This is the way it is done and the way it will always be done. Though I am not afraid, we must be practical."

Practical! He almost laughed aloud at the thought. It was superstition, plain and simple, with no proof of the night-fear that had come to dominate their society.

"All right," he said, and he closed the door and the lock clicked, and he drew the bolt securely. "But a lot of good it'll do! We lock our doors and put bolts on them to make sure they don't get in by counterfeiting our thumbprints; we barricade ourselves in our tiny metal worlds—but we don't keep them out, not really. They scratch and they claw and they howl and even if they don't we imagine they do, and we pretend we don't hear

them even while we lie shivering in the dark like frightened children. They may as well be in here!"

"John—"

"I mean it, Eve. What is out there? We don't really even know that. Why do we have to lock and bolt our doors when night comes? This is the twenty-first century, not the middle ages! What is there to fear out there besides the night and the darkness."

She shrugged. "The tales—"

"Superstition," he scoffed. "Mutations from the Third War! Monsters! Yet no one has ever seen any of these creatures. I'm sick of all this cowardice. We don't even know what we're hiding ourselves from. The only things out there are animals and the products of our imagination." He looked at the door. "I've got a good mind to—"

"No, please, for my sake." Her small arms went around him as though she were holding him from some terrible precipice, and he knew she couldn't have offered a stronger argument.

"Don't worry about that," he said, shrugging helplessly, his tone ashamed. "I'm just as much a coward as the others."

She looked up at him, lovely yet intensely practical. "It's something we have to face, like having to wash and eat and

sleep. I hate it as much as you, but I don't want you out there tackling monsters single-handed. Some people have tried it—"

She didn't elaborate on the thought, but she didn't have to. He held her close, feeling her heartbeat belie her outward calmness.

"Why do I have to be like this," he wondered to himself. "Why can't I be content like the others?"

He thought of his friend Frank Seyton, who had been curious too, dissatisfied with breathing the stale-seeming fresh air of the metal cabin, with feeling its walls closing you in like a trapped animal each night.

"I'm going out there, John," he had said one night. "I'm going to find out what's really there."

The next morning his cabin door was open, and both he and his wife Vicky had disappeared.

"But what is out there," John Corlan wondered furiously. "What!" He clenched his fists savagely and did not know.

The evening passed, as it always did. They ate pills and concentrates and sat quietly in cloud-foam chairs sipping familiar drinks and listening to music seeping like gentle mist from the walls. As though from

a distance noises came, almost inaudibly, as though someone were at the door, or at one of the windowless walls. But the soundproofing helped dim the noise and the music played its tune.

Eve looked up at the noise but said nothing, pretending not to hear.

They sat listening to the music, not hearing it, staring at the metal walls that could sprout pictures which moved and danced at a person's whim but which were now silent and gray.

After awhile, she said quietly, "You're going out, aren't you?"

"Why do you say that? No, of course I'm not going out."

"You're thinking about it."

"I always think about it."

"Please don't."

"I'll tell you before I do," he promised.

But he wondered if he *would* go out. He could scoff all he wanted and rant and rave over being cooped up, and he could blame the night noises on animals—but the mutation theory, however unpleasant, had a generation's insistence that it was true.

The Third War, with its germs and its radioactivity that made few places on Earth livable, might also produce strange creatures, that lived by night away from those who would

persecute it by day. Night was its friend, a concealer of strangeness, a natural ally to produce fear in the normals.

In the still of night, they could come across the hills and forests that sheltered the valley, from places that still shimmered and glowed with a strange unrelenting fire. It certainly was not impossible. There was even one theory, he recalled, about the mutants' bodily structures disintegrating under normal sunlight, but the scientist who ventured the opinion did so without insisting upon a physical examination of one of the creatures.

He allowed a trace of a smile to curve his lips. It was almost funny. And it would be funnier still if—if—

He let the thought play through his mind, as he had let it many times before. He completed it: if there were nothing out there, nothing really to be afraid of. The greatest fear was fear itself, fear of the unknown. They had built it up during the past generation and now everyone believed it. Tell it to a kid often enough and he'll hold it as gospel when he's a man. The noises they heard were animals and nothing more.

But what of Frank Seyton, and Vicky, and the others who had disappeared?

He didn't know, and he wondered if he ever would, or just go on living the way he had, helpless and shut in at night. He could take a gun out there with him, just in case, a weapon that could knock into eternity anyone or anything that came near him uninvited. With a gun he would be safe as long as he stayed on guard. Why not? He could be an emissary to the world of the night, break down the unnecessary barriers put up between them and the darkness. The thought was exhilarating.

Restlessly, he played the controls on the chair arm beside him, and a three-dimensional world of celluloid sprang to life with the walls confronting them. Magically, the world reconstructed itself and together he and Eve traveled across the canyons of time to the world that was: to the Europe of years ago, with its historic landmarks and monuments intact; to once-virile Africa, before uranium was discovered there; to Eastern United States, where tall towers of steel now existed only on film. They marveled at the wonders that had once been the world and forgot temporarily what lay beyond their door in the real world.

"It must have been nice then," she said.

"Yes," he agreed.

Then, you could go out in the dark walking into the crystal air, watching the stars trace patterns across the night sky. There were no wars then, no flights to save humanity, no fears of creatures that didn't exist.

"Yes," he repeated. "It must have been *very* nice."

After awhile, they allowed the beds to blossom from the walls like weird mechanical flowers, and they turned out the lights and undressed in the pale glow of luminescence that came as though from nowhere. The music murmured tunelessly as they lay silent in bed, listening for the real and imagined noises from the outside.

When he could hear her sleeping, John Corlan stealthily slipped from the bed, dressed, found his flame pistol, and stood in the darkness contemplating the move that might be his last. He hesitated, remembering himself saying, "I'll tell you before I do."

"I'm going out," he said quietly.

In the semi-darkness his wife stirred but did not waken. Satisfied, he went to the door, slipped the bolt, placed his thumb in the slot and heard the soft answering click. He swung open the door.

Darkness, velvety smooth and

unbroken. A cool wind that greeted him with eager arms. As he stared into the night, the moon came from behind clouds and swept the land with a pale hand that covered the trees as though with snow.

He stepped forward, clutching the pistol tightly in his hand, feeling his heartbeat quicken perceptibly.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he told himself. "Nothing to be afraid of. Nothing to be afraid of."

The door clicked shut behind him, and he stopped and for a moment felt sudden panic, a helpless sense of being alone, cut off, in a strange world. It swept over him in a swift tide, and fervently he looked around him. He remembered the gun in his hand and looked in the darkness for something to shoot at.

Trees rustled, whispering secretly, and he fought off the urge to fire into them. "Getting jumpy," he told himself. "There is nothing out there."

Something moved at the edge of the forest.

He cried out in sudden terror and whirled to press his thumb into the lock. Whirled—and stopped.

"John," a voice said quietly behind him. "John Corlan."

He froze with cold, unreasoning fear, and his heart beat an

insane tempo. Slowly, he turned, slowly as though he were on a pivot, unable to resist. The flame pistol was still in his hand, but his fingers felt numb and he knew he could not shoot.

"I knew you'd come out sooner or later," the voice said. "I've been waiting for you."

The man stood smiling at him in the moonlight not ten feet away, his face chalky and unreal.

John Corlan gasped. "Frank Seyton. But that's not possible. You're—"

"Dead?" Seyton furnished. "Far from it; in fact, I'm more alive than I've ever been. You have a lot to learn, John, about this world of ours. You see, there aren't really any monsters out here, just as we suspected there weren't. Only us. There's nothing to be afraid of, nothing at all."

"Nothing—at all?" He felt like laughing and crying in relief all at once. "But why didn't you come back?"

"Who would believe me?" Seyton wanted to know. "They prefer to believe tales of goblins and ghosts to reality. And I couldn't return to the life of being caged in like an animal." He looked upward. "Not after being out in the night, with the wind and the sky and the forests and all nature before me. Look at

the stars, John. Do you realize how long it's been since we've *really* looked at them?"

John Corlan tore his gaze from the man and stared at the patchwork sky. "Some people have never seen them at all," he remembered. "I hardly blame you for not coming back."

"I knew you'd see it my way," Frank said approvingly. "Of course, I couldn't stay here without Vicky, so I went back and got her. I imagine our disappearance caused quite a stir."

"It sure did; they figured the monsters ate you up," John Corlan laughed. It felt good to laugh again, to know that all your fears were foolish. At the thought, he became suddenly self-conscious and pocketed the flame pistol. "I wasn't taking any chances," he explained, somewhat ashamed.

There was a movement near the forest edge and Vicky glided toward them, smiling. "I'm glad you finally came out, John. Where's Eve?"

He motioned to the silent cabin. "She may be a little harder to convince," he warned.

"You can do it," she said.

She drifted toward him and put her arms about his neck. Surprised, he started to resist, but her perfume came over him and he relaxed.

"Welcome to the 'monsters,'" she said, kissing him.

Her touch was electric. His head whirled and his heart beat an unaccustomed tempo, and he felt suddenly as though he were poised at a great precipice, ready to fall. The air went rushing past in a sudden whir. The air flamed with invisible fire.

Then there was silence and the moonlight and the three of them standing in the night looking at each other. Frank stood smiling, and somehow it seemed like the most natural thing in the world that this was the way it should be. All at once, the night seemed friendly again.

After that, he met the others. Some he knew, persons who had disappeared and been given up for dead; others he did not know, who had come from beyond the mountains seeking such a valley—but all were as human as he was. They met in a glade that smelled of strange perfumes and cast dancing shadows across white smiling faces. The glade murmured with the sound of their voices, and for the first time in a long while, he felt content.

He said finally, "I'll have to go back after Eve."

Frank Seyton nodded. "Bring her here, John. The more we have on our side, the better for all of us," he suggested.

Minutes later, John Corlan was pressing his thumb into the lock and swinging the door open. He closed it with the customary click and waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the dimness. It was strange to be in the narrow room after being in the open.

Suddenly the lights flared, and he blinked and held his hand to shield his eyes from the glare.

"Hey, take it easy," he said good-naturedly. "You want to—"

He stopped, stunned, for Eve was in the center of the room, wide awake, the pistol in her hand pointing directly at him.

"Watch where you're pointing that thing," he warned.

"Stay where you are," she said.

He frowned. "Say, what is this?"

"How do I know you're not one of them," she said, trembling a little. "One of the mutants in disguise. Maybe they killed John and sent you in his place."

"This is silly," he scoffed. "There aren't any mutations or monsters or anything else out there. Just people as real as I am, Eve, it's wonderful. Frank's out there, and Vicky, and others. I was right. There's nothing out there to fear. Nothing at all."

"Nothing?" The gun wavered

a fraction and suddenly she became aware of the weapon and lowered it. "But—"

"They want me to bring you out there, convince you there's nothing to fear."

She hesitated, and then said firmly, "All right, I'll go out with you. Tomorrow."

"What? Look, being practical is one thing, but really—"

"Tomorrow," she repeated mechanically. "Tomorrow morning when the sun is high and bright and warm in the sky. That's when I'll go out."

He grew suddenly pale. "But you can't!"

"Why not?"

"I don't know why not, but you just can't, that's all. It's not allowed."

She stared at him. "Not—allowed?"

"Well, what I mean is—well, somehow I don't care to see the daytime anymore. It's been rotten and dirty and it's destroyed the world, and it'll probably destroy this settlement if we give it time. You've never been out in the night, Eve; you don't know what it's like, when the forest is alive and the stars are out. Have you ever really taken a long look at the stars—"

"Get out," she said quietly.

"What? But—"

"Get out," she repeated, but

the words choked a little this time and she brandished the pistol for emphasis.

"Now see here—" He stepped forward, but a lance of fire darted past him, and a sudden animal fear grasped him. "Eve—" the word caught in his throat.

He could see tears welling in her eyes, reflecting like bright diamonds in the harsh lighting. "Get out," she cried, "get out, get out."

A finger of flame pointed past him as she clutched the pistol in a frantic grip, and hastily he stumbled backward, his thoughts jumbled and desperate. Automatically, he groped for the lock, but his mind was unable to comprehend what was taking place. His glands took over and shouted: run, run, run. Then the door was wide and he was out in the night, and the door clicked and there was darkness again. The bolt was drawn into place, and he could hear her sobbing muffled through the door.

Frank and Vicky were beside him.

"Don't worry," Frank said consolingly, "at least you're free; you're one of us now.

You'll like it beyond the mountains."

John Corlan shook his head bewilderedly. The dark cool night seemed good after the bright enclosure of the cabin, with its walls of gray metal on all sides surrounding him like a cage.

"I don't understand," he said slowly. "When I was in there with her, I wanted to kiss her. I didn't want to make her angry. I just wanted to kiss her. I felt as though, somehow, that would help make everything all right. The way you kissed me. On the neck—"

"It's all right," Vicky said, leading him from the cabin and the muffled sounds of crying from within. "We'll get her eventually."

"Yes," he said vaguely. "Yes, I suppose we will."

Carefully, he massaged his throat, wondering briefly at the flake of red that powdered his fingertip. Then he forgot about it as the night, cool and serene, enveloped them. It felt good to be out again.

But he couldn't help but wonder what it would be like, not to see the sun.

Samsi

BY PETER COCCAGNA

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

Samsi came from the hills that weren't there to talk to Little Franklin and give him a promise. But what could even Samsi do against the plottings of an unnatural mother and Little Franklin's own deformity?

The huge black woman expertly propped the small boy against the pillow, then leaned over and fondly stroked the golden head.

"After I git these dishes all washed and cleaned we is goin' to do more 'rithmetic."

"But I don't like arithmetic," the pale child complained, his voice thin and weak. "Can't we do something else? Like geography? Shall we do some more painting?"

"We is goin' to do some more 'rithmetic," Rachel said firmly, "on account of it bein' 'rithmetic time. How do you 'spect to git on in the world when you is all growed up if you don't know that two and two is four? How do you 'spect to go in a store and git the right change? People will cheat you for sure."

"What's that, Retchel?"

"That is when people take what you got when you need it most."

With an impatient sigh, Rachel raised the breakfast tray from the bed and made for the door. Then she paused and turned around.

"Mind you, I'm comin' back soon, and I want to find you all ready with your pencil and papers and book. So you might as well git out of that bed right now."

The door locked behind her. Franklin lay still for several minutes before flinging the bedclothes aside and stepping gingerly on the sagging, carpetless floor. His movements were mechanical, seemingly born of countless reiterations. He bent over the basin of clear water resting on a dilapidated table

near the wide-silled window, and washed himself thoroughly. After combing his hair without benefit of mirror, he dressed; then removed the basin and all watery traces from the table, procured book, pencil and papers, and then sat on a wooden stool drawn to the table before he assumed his air of resignation.

His body was small and frail, and on a scrawny neck perched an adult-sized head. Almost ludicrous in appearance, in proportion to the rest of his body, the massive head, with its large, clouded blue eyes, nodded ever so often, as though unable to sustain its own weight.

Aside from the nodding motions, the boy did not move, but sat staring long and vacantly into space. Rachel found him in that position twenty minutes later.

"Those stairs will be the death of me yet," she puffed seating herself on a chair next to him. "Now, is you all ready? That's what I calls a good boy."

"Can't we learn more geography?" Franklin whimpered, his eyes looking pleadingly upward.

Rachel waved a black finger before his face.

"Now, look here, Little Franklin! Jest 'cause I done waited on you since you was born is no reason to think you is always

goin' to have your own way. And besides," she added ominously, "if your Mammy finds out we ain't tendin' to our schoolin' we is goin' to be mighty sad."

"She doesn't care and how can she know? She doesn't come to see me and I'm glad when she stays away. She's mean and she hates me."

"Hush that mouth, Little Franklin!"

"She's mean and she hates me," he repeated. "And I'm glad when she stays away."

Rachel leaned close and patted the monstrous head.

"Some day," she whispered, "you'll have the whole world to stomp 'round in."

Hopefully, worshipfully, the blue eyes stared up at her.

"And then I'll not be wrong in the head?"

"You're not to say such things," she flared indignantly. "There is nothin' wrong with your head. Your head is all right."

"But Mommy once said—"

"It don't matter what she said."

"She called me an idiot. What's that, Retchel?"

"That's jest a name. Names don't mean nothin' atall."

"Is it a name for somebody like me? My head is awful big, Retchel. It's almost as big as yours, and I am so small."

"Let's git to our geography, if you want," she said evasively.

With a cry of delight the boy rose quickly, and from the neat pile of books stacked in a corner of the attic selected his choice and returned to his seat.

"Now, lemme see," reflected Rachel, taking up the book and thumbing its pages. "We could learn somethin' 'bout Africa, which I know to be a dark, dark continent."

"Why is it dark, Retchel?"

Rachel stared, momentarily stumped.

"Doesn't the sun ever shine there?"

"Sure it does! It shines all day, same as here. But over there is nothin' but jungles and more jungles, which means trees and vines all messed up together somethin' awful, so that it's mighty hard for a body to git through. And there is plenty of wild animals that ain't scared of nothin' and nobody."

"Animals like cats and dogs?" Franklin's eyes shone feverishly.

"Lawd, no! Somethin' much bigger and stronger and hungrier. There is the elephant as big as a house and the snake as big as a tree. And there is the lion and the tiger, with strong teeth longer'n your biggest finger for them to eat up all the smaller animals."

"And when there are no smaller animals," the boy asked, "what do they eat then, Retchel?"

"Why, they all sneak down to the villages and gobble up the people."

"And eat them up?"

"That's right." She now eyed him with suspicion.

"But they come over here sometimes, don't they?"

"Over here they is kept in iron cages so they can't git free. Then all the people can see them and not git hurt."

"Or gobbled up?"

"Or gobbled up. And what makes you ask such things that ain't good for a little boy to know? Sometimes you git me talkin' when I know I should keep my big mouth shut. Now what done come over you?"

Franklin had stiffened his body on the stool, his eyes blazing with the mingled revelations of knowledge and triumph!

"Now I know who Samsi is!" he breathed, delighted.

"What do you mean, Samsi?" Rachel exclaimed, a little astonished at the light in his eyes. "I never taught you 'bout no Samsi. Who is Samsi?"

He stared speechless, a startled look replacing the ecstatic mien of a few seconds ago.

"Is you goin' to tell me who Samsi is?" she asked again.



He didn't answer, though the lips moved feebly. Then, finally: "There ain't no Samsi."

"Now don't you git to talkin' like I talk," Rachel scolded. "I done told you 'bout that before. Now, who is this Samsi?"

"I don't know," he answered, sullenly.

"Who is Samsi?"

"He might be mad over my telling," he ventured, cautiously.

"And he might not," she snapped. "Now, who is he?"

"He's like . . . like those animals you said were in Africa." He averted his eyes.

"And where did you git to see such an animal?"

"Out there." Franklin flung a thin arm in the direction of the closed window. "Out there—flyin' around."

Rachel's mouth gaped wide. "Flyin' 'round?"

He nodded, confidently. "Flyin' around."

"Animals don't go flyin' 'round, Little Franklin. They walk and they crawl, but they don't go flyin' 'round."

"Samsi does," the boy said quietly.

"What you seen," Rachel readily explained, "was some big, big bird, but no animal."

"Samsi is not a bird." He looked at her critically.

Lawd, thought Rachel, maybe the boy is crazy. Or jest gittin'

that way. And all the time I thought . . .

"Where does this Samsi come from, then?" she asked reluctantly.

"From the hills."

"What hills?"

"The hills out there," he replied, again indicating the window.

"There ain't no hills out there. And how come you been climbin' on the window? I warned you 'bout that. If you ever fall there won't be much of you left after you hits the ground. You say you done seen hills out there?"

He nodded his heavy head. The now perturbed woman rose, lifted him up from the stool and sat him on the wide sill. Then they both peered through the cracked, grimy glass.

Rachel saw Salem spread below her, a wide panorama of countless roofs and gables, spires and steeples, streets and alleyways. The muffled sounds of rumbling vehicles darting over the asphalt roads below came faintly to her ears. And nowhere could she discern the sight of any hill, nor the vague suggestion of one.

"Do you know what a hill is?" she asked, turning her attention to the silent boy. Of course, she knew he knew. But for many mo-

ments he did not reply, continuing to stare out of the window with a fascinated concentration which to Rachel seemed disconcerting and unjustified.

"I don't see them any more," he stated firmly, turning his face from the window.

"Then you is lyin'!" Rachel accused suddenly.

Franklin appeared severely shocked.

"Then you is lyin' to me," repeated Rachel vehemently. "If you said there is hills out there then there must be hills, 'cause you would not tell a lie to your Rachel the first time. But now I know you is lyin' when you say there ain't no hills."

"Then you see them too?" he asked eagerly.

"There! I knowed it. Now I know you is lyin' when you say there ain't no hills."

She scratched her head perplexedly. "If you lied to me the second time 'bout these hills then there must be hills out there—only there ain't."

She eyed him reproachfully. "You git me all messed up, sayin' one thing one time and then changin' your story."

The blue eyes misted over; the head nodded, raised, and a lower lip began to tremble. Waves of self-condemnations swept over Rachel. She gazed at the oversized head perched so grotesque-

ly on that diminutive neck, and upbraided herself mentally.

"You is right, Little Franklin," she smiled toothsomely. "There is hills out there."

He became instantly joyous. "There are? Then you were playing a game?"

"That's right," she grinned. "Jest a game."

"Wonder what he means 'bout Samsi?" Rachel asked herself drowsily in bed that night. "First time he ever got to talkin' wild. And there ain't no hills out there—no hills at all! Lawd! Miss Sarah sure paid that old doctor-man plenty to keep his mouth shut. Don't see him come 'round no more. Six years . . . sure is long time to stay in one little room . . ."

She slept, and dreams of the past enveloped her like the soft mists of fog, gloom-shrouded and encompassing, swirling beneath the pressure of voices bitter with hate . . . Franklin and his wife, the beautiful Sarah, were quarreling again. And she was cold, contemptuous; his face was white. Why shouldn't she spend his hard-earned money for clothes, jewels, and other things she thought she should have? Did he really expect her to bury herself like a nun in that funereal home of his just because he was a dottering invalid

and couldn't get around? She was his wife, wasn't she? And didn't he have plenty of money?

"How come you married that she-devil?" muttered Rachel, in her uneasy sleep, to the sifting vapors.

You fooled me completely with your smooth tongue, sweet manners, and your sophisticated ways. I should have known better. My friends tried to warn me, but I would not listen . . .

I didn't force you to marry me, did I?

No, but you deceived me, and I detest deceit above all things . . . even above a wanton, nagging, and selfish wife . . .

"You always did, Mister Franklin," Rachel muttered on. "And she sure nagged you plenty 'cause I done seen with my own two eyes. And she flittin' all along the best places in town while you has to stay home on account of your bad heart. She knows you can't be gittin' so awful mad all the time. How come she gits you that way, then? And talkin' to you 'bout other men the way she does? One of these days you is goin' to git mad for the last time if you don't start to calmin' down."

I know, Rachel. She almost finished me when she told me bluntly that she didn't want my child—that she didn't relish being tied down to motherhood. I

could have killed her for that, I think. Yes, I could have killed her! And I wanted a son. I wanted a son very much. Remember how she quieted down when I threatened to change my will—to forsake even the honor and reputation of my name toward ruining her life if she dared to obstruct that birth?

"If that bad heart of yours had lasted a little longer you could have seen your boy, Mister Franklin. And she done kept everything quiet. And I heard her askin' that doctor-man to git rid of him, but he was too scared. She had to pay him plenty to keep him from talkin' 'bout Little Franklin bein' born and all. Not your doctor-man, Mister Franklin. I never seen this one before. This one looked to me like one of them slick dressers in the movies what ain't up to no good. And she hates me, 'cause I know. And she was awful mad 'bout that part of the will you left sayin' I was to stay in the house, and that it could never be sold or nothin' . . . If it wasn't for Little Franklin, I'd git out anyway . . . And where is you goin', Mister Franklin? I can't see you any good right now . . ."

"You'll be well paid," Sarah Barris said to Rachel the following afternoon. "Enough to make you comfortable the rest of your days—very comfortable."

Seated in the spacious library, where she had been summoned, Rachel could only stare at Sarah—stare with unbelieving eyes at this woman who seemed not a woman, but something risen from some unholy pit. And that something stood before her, looking unmercifully down on her; a sphinx-like something with a stone face and pale eyes devoid of any trace of warmth or feeling. And it now struck Rachel, even during these terrible moments, that she had never heard Sarah laugh, not seen her smile . . .

The cold face and pale eyes continued to gaze down on her, waiting for her reply. But the reply Rachel sought to give did not issue from her throat, and stuck there in the form of a gurgle.

"Well?" Sarah's voice, crisp and sudden, was like a whip-lash across Rachel's face.

"You don't know what you're sayin', Miss Sarah," she finally gasped out. Her entire huge frame shook with the convulsive effort of restraining the terrible rage and hatred now coursing, stronger than ever before, through her body. She sensed more than realized that the loss of such restraint would be of no help to her or to Little Franklin. Notwithstanding, Rachel's black eyes bored into Sarah's

light ones with a deadly animosity of such intensity as to be beyond the bounds of concealment or restraint.

"I have a plan worked out very carefully, without loopholes—without the slightest chance of risk or discovery," Sarah said, speaking naturally. "No one in this world knows that the child exists—only you and I."

She eyed the black woman speculatively, as if shrewdly determining her opponent's powers of resistance.

"What 'bout that doctor-man?" Rachel scarcely recognized her own voice.

"He died last month. Among his papers he had left no mention of the child or its birth. Now that I am certain we can go ahead with what must be done."

Rachel half-rose from her seat, then sank back again, her face a sickly gray, her eyes now flashing the fires of fierce anger.

"I raised him since he was born, jest like he was my own. I done fed and dressed him, and sewed his clothes for him and tried to learn him some school-in'; and now you ask me to help you git rid of him for good. No, Miss Sarah, I ain't goin' to help you kill off Little Franklin. I'd sooner git killed myself."

"It isn't . . ." Sarah paused,

then continued. "It's idiotic, scarcely understands. It can't reason; can't think properly and normally."

"You don't know him like I do, Miss Sarah," the infuriated Rachel flung back. "He's sure smart! And he talks better'n me. How come you keep him locked up in that old attic when you could send him to some nice, clean place where they take care of people like poor Little Franklin? How come you hate him so much, Miss Sarah? 'Taint his fault bein' born with that big head. It's sure a sad thing Mister Franklin ain't around. He'd sure git that poor boy out from under that roof! He wouldn't care 'bout what people say or 'bout disgrace to family name as long as Little Franklin was sufferin' somethin' awful."

Sarah's pale eyes glinted like frosted bits of ice; her face whitened. Yet her voice remained calm, though quavering slightly with effort toward control.

"You're a complete fool. To let it live would be to do it an injustice. The sight of it would result only in scorn, disgust, loathing, ridicule! It would live to curse us for permitting it to live. It's not murder, Rachel—can't I drive that through your head? Our way is merciful, do you understand? Merciful!"

"No killin' is merciful, Miss Sarah." Rachel's giant body trembled violently amid the throes of her ordeal. Beneath Sarah's cool poise and measured words, Rachel sensed the repressed rage and knew, from past experience, that Sarah's rage was a terrible thing. And yet, for the first time, Rachel found herself curiously devoid of any dread of Sarah or her temper.

"I could leave you out of it completely," Sarah said. "But you know too much and later would be bound to talk. With you implicated I can feel perfectly safe."

Rachel didn't answer. Sarah now advanced a few steps and stood with a frown.

"Listen to me, Rachel," she said, ominously. "You know too well that that being in the attic can wipe out everything—everything that has gone and is to come. As long as it lives we'll never know a moment's peace—never have a moment's rest. Furthermore, I am thinking of marrying again. Unless we do this thing . . . if it became known that the malformed idiot is my son . . ."

She paused, dispassionately regarding the seated woman whose face glared up with mute defiance.

"Think it over," she con-

tinued, "There's not too much of a hurry. And after six years I can well afford to wait several weeks more. Something in his milk and he just goes to sleep. And everything will be safe, do you understand? There won't be any danger whatsoever. If you refuse, I'll find some other way. This thing has to be done, do you understand? It has to be done!"

The following morning brought the early October sun pouring brilliantly through the attic window. Rachel sat Franklin on the window sill, his favorite spot, then stepped back to admire the fires reflecting from that head of gold.

"Like fires that never go out," she muttered.

"Fires burn, don't they?" Franklin was enthusiastic.

"Sure, if you gits close enough. Now don't git started on such questions so early in the mornin'. And how come you ain't got your shoes on?"

"They're under the bed," he replied, as though imparting some secret.

Rachel walked across the floor, got on her knees and, grunting with effort, peered beneath the low bed.

"How come you throwed your shoes 'way back there?" she exclaimed.

"I didn't! I didn't!" Franklin cried, deeply hurt.

The kneeling woman shot him an exasperated glance, and did not endeavor a reply. She finally managed to extricate the shoes, straightened herself slowly, and once more approached the sun-bathed window.

"Put out your feet, and don't do a thing like that again."

"But I didn't," he protested, eyes fast filling with tears, "I didn't!"

"If you didn't and they was left near the foot of the bed last night, then who did?" she demanded.

"I . . . I guess Samsi did," he faltered.

"So you is goin' to blame it on Samsi now, eh? How many times must I tell you that honesty is the best policy? Now, there . . . there . . . Little Franklin. Your Rachel was jest only foolin' and talkin' her fool head off. She don't mean for you to cry."

"I didn't!" He was sobbing loudly now.

"That Samsi done kicked them under there," Rachel said indignantly. "I knowed it all the time! Now hold out your feet and we'll git on these shoes."

Wiping away his tears with a small fist, he looked at her gratefully.

"And tell me," Rachel soothed,

"how comes this Samsi done kicked your shoes 'way under the bed?"

"Samsi took me to the hills last night," he announced, proudly. "And I climbed on his back and wasn't scared."

"Is that so?" marveled Rachel, busy with the shoes.

"He waited till I dressed, then we went to the hills, and Samsi put me down and then sat on a tall chair made of rock. And then people came and lit some fires and danced. Then Samsi made a funny sound and the people dropped to the ground and weren't people any more, but big cats and dogs, some without tails or fur, and some had horns sticking out of their heads. When the fires started going out the cats and dogs jumped to their feet and were people once more. And after they went away Samsi brought me back. He covered me up good after I undressed and got in bed, and he must have kicked my shoes when they got in his way, because he gets awful mad sometimes."

A superstitious shudder played up and down Rachel's spine.

"Does this Samsi come in by the window or by the door?"

Bewilderment spread over the boy's face. He stared vacantly and silently for many moments

before replying, as though unable to comprehend her question.

"He . . . just comes," he answered slowly, doubtfully.

She raised him off the sill and sat him on the stool. Then she pushed the old table before him.

"You is goin' to have breakfast on this table 'stead off the blankets from now on, on account of you messin' up the bed more and more all the time. And you jest sit there till I git back, 'cause I ain't goin' to lock the door. Now, is you goin' to do as I say, or do I have to go to the trouble of lockin' and openin' the door?"

"I promise, Retchel," he said, solemnly.

"Maybe there was hills out there a long time ago," Rachel mumbled to herself on her way down the tortuous stairs with the basin of soiled water, "and there could be some crazy animal-bird flyin' through the air a long time ago. Don't the old books say there was witches hanged here in the old days?"

Later, in the kitchen, she paused in the act of pouring milk into a bowl of cereal. Her hands trembled slightly; her coal-black eyes widened.

"Maybe he is what they call hexed," she reflected aloud. "Maybe he sees things and hears things that nobody else can."

Things that is there—jest for people like him to see and feel. Maybe his big head makes him that way. Guess I'd better find out some more 'bout this Samsi."

The breakfast tray completed, she began her journey through the deserted lower chambers and eventually up the winding attic stairs.

"Never did take to hexed people," she breathed uneasily. "They is too much like ghosts, and I hate ghosts. But Little Franklin ain't no harm."

True to his promise, the boy hadn't budged. She placed the tray on the table before him, then sat herself near, watching him closely. He ate as he usually did—slowly, almost reluctantly, as though measuring each and every mouthful to determine disagreeable qualities beforehand.

"How come this Samsi talks to you?" Rachel shot at him with an unintentional abruptness. Although she couldn't recall Franklin ever saying anything to this effect, she took the assumption quite naturally, based mainly on the boy's attitude and inferences lurking behind his words.

Franklin had stopped eating, having welcomed the interruption, and sat gazing at her with a puzzled expression.

"If he is an animal like you

say," Rachel persisted, "how come he talks to you?"

"He just talks."

"He makes sounds like I make?"

The head nodded before he shook it negatively.

"How?"

"Like . . . like . . ." He evidently found it difficult to express his meaning plainly. Then his eyes lighted up. "Like that small bug we once found near the window that made that funny noise."

"That bee that made that buz-zin' noise?"

He beamed at her. "Yes, buzzing noise. And when he buzzes at me I buzz right back at him."

Rachel eyed him dubiously. "And when he buzzes what does he say?"

"He said he would come back one more time, and then he would have to go back where he came from and stay till the stars moved right and woke him up once more. And when he wakes up again he won't come to me any more." He now appeared on the verge of one of his sudden outbursts of weepings.

"Why won't he come no more?" Rachel asked the boy quickly.

"He said I won't be able to see him or talk with him then. He said things would be changed. I cried when he said this and he

told me not to—that I'd be glad when he would not come."

"Did he say why?"

His head nodded, heavily. "He said because my head would be all right and because of this he would be all wrong."

The tears fell now, trickling down to fall on the food before him.

"What else did he say?" Rachel asked, feeling cold shivers running through her body.

"He said he was going to change things around, and make Mommy behave, and we wouldn't have to be afraid any more."

"He done told you that?" Rachel breathed. "Change things around so your Mammy behaves? How?"

"I don't know," Franklin answered, staring at his food. "He didn't say how. Maybe he'll change her into a cat or dog, like he did those people, only he won't change her back again. He hates Mommy, but he likes you, because you are good to me."

Rachel leaned closer. "Did he say when . . . he was goin' to change things around?"

"When Mommy gets a headache—a real bad one and can't go out and has to stay home."

"Your Mammy never gits headaches," retorted the woman. "And she always goes out nights."

"Samsi said *he* would give her the headache—a real bad one so she won't go out."

He spoke convincingly, without the slightest intonation of doubt. And Rachel stared at him fixedly, stirrings of fearful superstitions rising to contradict and finally overwhelm the reasoning powers of her mind. She fully realized, in her own way, that the boy had never before delved into the realms of strange imaginings, despite his prolonged and unnatural confinement within the four walls of the dreary attic. She had always refused to believe him "off his head". And in the face of this Samsi affair, she still persisted in her refusal. Her superstitious nature knew only too well the existence of "forces" or "elements" beyond the scrutiny and comprehension of the human mind. Dark tales of voodoo filtered through her brain, resurrecting themselves from the unforgotten past. The *papaloi* and the *obeah* reared their ugly heads . . .

Sweat beaded her brow. Her huge frame shook so violently and perceptibly that little Franklin appeared a little startled. Almost immediately after, he gave a smile and patted her hand.

"Don't you worry, Retchel," he soothed. "Samsi won't hurt or change you. Only Mommy."

That evening a white-faced

Sarah sent Rachel out for headache tablets and thereafter confined herself to her room. Hours later, when Rachel tiptoed her way outside Sarah's door, she heard the sound of muffled moans through the closed door, and exulted in the indication that the headache—as predicted by Little Franklin—was a “real bad one.”

With the coming of night the cautious Rachel consumed a dose of a sleeping potion she had procured along with Sarah's headache tablets, determined to pass the night in total oblivion rather than risk a conscious knowledge of whatever horror she felt Samsi was sure to bring.

To her, Sarah's tormenting headache had unquestionably verified the incredible existence of Little Franklin's guardian and protector; and there was nothing to do now but wait until the unbelievable Samsi changed things. Wasn't that what he had promised Little Franklin?

As the drowsiness stole over Rachel she had transitory visions of Sarah's cruel countenance being subtly merged with canine characteristics, and experienced a great pleasure in another vision of a small, Sarah-faced dog being led on a leash held by Little Franklin.

“Lock her up,” she muttered sleepily. “Lock her up, Little

Franklin, like she did you.”

Hours later she woke to find herself in a cold sweat. She remained passive for some time, unable to account for the sudden awakening. “Obviously, the sleeping potion had not been strong enough.

She now thought of Samsi, and shuddered. Above the thudding of her heart and the irregular rasps of breathing, she could detect no sound. The house fairly pulsed with silence; nothing emitted the least suspicious creak or whisper. And the stillness *was* frightening. *Something*, she knew, had jolted her from a drug-laden sleep.

She now recalled the vague vapors of a monstrous dream. In the dream, a furious and gigantic gust of wind had attacked the house, shaking it to its foundation, rattling violently against the windows, slamming shut all doors like the cannonading of angry thunder, sucking eerily through dark corridors and empty rooms with a whistling horror before subsiding into a guttural wail like the deep-throated whine of a hungry lion. And on the heels of the dying wail there matured another cry—a thin, child-like screech of unbearable torment; a screech bearing all the chilling ingredients of a terrible anguish re-

bellling at the unknown predicament of an outraged soul. . . .

But, Rachel reasoned, it had all been a dream. Still, a premonition of dread overcame her. She rose quickly, dressing hurriedly, not even pausing to turn on the electricity. A few minutes later she was stealing bare-footed along the moonlit hall toward the rear of the house. She now felt for the key to Franklin's room she always kept in her dress pocket — it was there, cold against her fingers. She rounded a corner of the long hall, then stood suddenly still. A silver thread of light revealed itself in the pitch darkness, low along the floor. Sarah's bedroom lay behind that closed door. It appeared that Sarah had not yet retired, though dawn could be but a matter of a few hours away.

Rachel crept slowly and quietly until she stood opposite the door, where she remained, tense with listening. Many minutes passed. There was no sound. Perhaps, she reflected, Sarah had dropped off to sleep with the light burning after a miserable night with that terrible headache of hers.

Once more Rachel thought of Samsi and shuddered. Her concern for Little Franklin overcame her fears, propelled her deeper into the hallway. The

darkness presented her with no serious inconvenience, for she had traversed this route countless times before. In this particular hall the light bulb had long since burned out, and had never been replaced. Nevertheless, she found the lower landing of the winding stairs leading to the attic with very little difficulty.

Beneath her ponderous weight the stairs creaked in protest; and she hoped fervently that the sounds, magnified as they were in the stillness, would not penetrate the door and disturb Little Franklin.

Her love for the boy made her an extremely courageous woman. She had trouble inserting the key—not because of the darkness, but because of the trembling of her hand. The lock clicked loudly as she twisted the key, more from stiffness than from any mechanical defect. She had meant to oil that lock several days ago but had neglected to do so.

The door swung silently on its hinges. Immediately after, Rachel's unsteady hand groped along the left wall to where the light switch was located.

The blinding light dazzled her momentarily. Almost instantly a bestial odor, strong and overpowering, assailed her nostrils. She recognized the odor, for it

reminded her of an unclean zoo she once visited; and with the recognition came thoughts which seemed to converge simultaneously inside her agonized head before exploding with terrifying force across her eyes, conjuring forth visions so fearful as to petrify her where she stood—a creature of stone staring wildly toward the small bed at one corner of the room.

Propped upon the disheveled bed, in a semi-reclining position, was the boy's motionless form.

Some insane shock had convulsed the small features almost beyond recognition; the eyes were wide and protruding, maintaining a wildly terrified glassiness as though some monstrous sight had indelibly blasted them thus. A small stream of saliva trickled slowly from one corner of the loosely hung, lower lip. The boy's face, white as snow and immovable, was focused toward the closed window, to the left of the door and the motionless Rachel.

With a tremendous effort of will, Rachel fought off her lethargy and approached the bed,

staring intently and incredulously into the boy's maddened eyes. Fear, horror, incredulity: all these began to flee from her, one by one.

Minutes later, a huge grin spread slowly over her face.

The boy gave a convulsive tremor, then sank limply back. For an instant a flicker of sanity and recognition came and went in those eyes which Rachel knew were not Little Franklin's eyes. . .

Not Little Franklin's eyes, at all!

Rachel thrust her face with a defiant gesture close to the boy's.

"That Samsi sure did change things around," she gloated, still grinning. "Now you know how it feels. Now you know, Miss Sarah!"

Now she backed away from the bed, turned and sped down the attic stairs, into the darkness and down the hallway toward Sarah's bedroom.

Rachel's voice boomed through the house, over and over again: "*Little Franklin! Little Franklin!*"

RACHAELA

BY POUL ANDERSON

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, they claim. In that, there's a large element of error—because that's obviously what hell must have. Fury, anguish—and with women around, something more. . . .

If you think writing is an easy and glamorous profession, you have another think coming. Physically, of course, it doesn't involve much, though several straight hours of key-punching can leave you pretty bushed; but then, lack of exercise is hard on the body too. And your brain sweats for you. It isn't built for monotonous work — if it were, you wouldn't be a writer — but that's what the job all too often becomes. Only in the rare moments of being "hot" can the average writer turn out page after page of really good stuff without a pause or a sense of effort; and his creditors don't wait for his inspirations. Anyway, editors usually bounce his proudest masterpieces right back at him, or if they do get published the readers' columns present a similar lack of judgment. "It stinks! Why can't he write more like *Three To Make*

Ready? There was a *story!*" *Three To Make Ready*, our author recalls wearily, was a piece of machine-tooled hack written by the simple process of fitting jig-saw plot elements together and then grimly pecking away till it was done, and all solely for the purpose of meeting his bills.

Everybody's out of step but Willy.

As for the glamor, you can have it and welcome. The profession is about as glamorous as bricklaying.

Carsten leaned back, gave his room a bitter glance, and lit another cigaret. Smoke hazed the cluttered drabness around him, the rumped bed, the untidy heap of books, the stuffed and bulging wastebasket, the coffeepot sitting on the hotplate and thinking its own dark thoughts. *If I stay here much longer*, he thought, *I'll go stark, staring mad and*

begin turning out nothing but schizophrenic clinical material. Maybe it'd be an improvement at that. Look what Joyce got by with in Ulysses.

His moody eyes turned back to the tumbled heap of manuscript before him. He slipped the first page from the bottom and read the beginning with a dislike approaching nausea.

THE LADY IS A STRANGER

By William Carsten

She was tall, almost as tall as I, and she moved with a flow of strength and grace, like a young lioness. That was what she xxxxxxxx xxxx made me think of, the first time I saw her, a great tawny cat, hair like dull gold tumbling to her wide golden shoulders and xxx shining ever so softly in the muted light. Her face was strange, high wide cheekbones sloping down lovely planes to the xxxxx full strong mouth — red, red as new-spilled blood, that mouth, and I didn't think it was cosmetic. In spite of the perfection of her figure, it was her eyes that held me most stongly.

"Bah," said Carsten aloud. "You may quote me." Automatically, he pencilled out the excess "eyes" and slipped an "r" into "stongly." It wasn't very clean copy. Or a very clean story. Or a very good one.

In fact, the whole thing stank.

He sighed and ruffled his hair. What was the matter with him? He wasn't any genius, no Tolstoy or de Maupassant, and he knew it. But he'd done better than this. His adventure stories had been well received. They weren't the *Iliad*, but they showed the influence. So when he wanted to write something more quiet and arty, why wouldn't it jell?

He walked over to the bed and flopped down on it with his hands behind his head. It was a good plot he had. Nothing extraordinary, but a good sound idea which in the hands of a real master could have been a minor classic. But then, everything the masters wrote, regardless of plot, was that way, wherefore they were the masters.

Boy meets girl. Picks her up in a bar, in a nice sort of way. She's what he's always been looking for, beautiful and wise and generally desirable, and quickly wraps him around her little finger. Only this is wartime Portugal, overrun with Allied and Axis agents, and our hero works for the O.S.S. He thinks she's Swedish, and in the course of events lets slip certain important information. Then he learns she's working for the Italians, less because she wants to





than because the Fascists hold her father on a trumped-up charge, and he's their hostage for her good behavior. He can't bring himself to turn her in—it'd be hard to do, anyway—but he keeps her prisoner till too late for her knowledge to do them any good. He wants her to break with the enemy, but in spite of being in love with him too she won't, and in the end he lets her go, wondering if he's played the traitor or not and if he'll ever see her again. Gentle sob. The end. Six thousand words.

So why does it come out to be over-written sickly-purple crud that no editor would touch even with the famous eleven-foot, four and three quarter-inch pole? It couldn't be the fact that his exchequer was getting low. He'd written fairly good stuff before, under worse pressure—in fact, his bank balance was still safely plus.

Maybe he just wasn't cut out to write anything but bang-bang sizz-boom up-and-at-'em. After all, he knew a little something about that. He'd never seen actual combat, but he was a fair man with a gun, a horse, or a fencing saber, he'd crossed oceans and cruised a bit in sailboats, and he went down to the Y once a month or so for a little boxing . . . Well, what of it? He knew as much about women as any

normal bachelor with a ready flow of words, he should be able to do a fairly convincing heroine.

Still, his exotically named Rachaela was no ordinary woman. Insofar as he had modelled her after anyone, she was a combination of a blonde he'd known, a woman as beautiful and about as warm and friendly as an iceberg, and a small dark nymphomaniac he'd once had the pleasure of meeting. Only of meeting—she'd been living with someone else at the time—but he'd liked her wry sense of humor. She had looked on the world with what must have been a rather horribly clear vision. He wondered where she was now.

The mixture didn't mix, though. No sane human could have two such diverse components. And yet, damn it, he *knew* what a strange and complex being he wanted to describe. The trouble lay in getting her into words.

Of course, even if he had character trouble, that was no excuse for bad writing. And his prose this time was just plain rotten.

"Hell!" Carsten flung himself to his feet as the cigaret burned too close to his lips. "The devil take her! Let's go out and get some personal experience of alcohol. Authors have to gather atmosphere, don't they?"

It was five o'clock and he hadn't had a drink all day. What he needed was relaxation, escape from the circumscribed shabbiness of his room and himself. Let's see—he counted the money in his wallet. Enough for a few nips in a really decent place. That ought to snap him out of his doldrums.

His favorite bar was only a few blocks from his shabby apartment house. Study in contrasts—you walked down a dingy street, turned a corner, and were out on a thoroughfare of shining store fronts, exclusive night clubs, and the elite of Manhattan. He liked the lounge in the Hotel Margrave. It was quiet and well-upholstered and discreetly lit, and the bartender knew how to fix a Martini. Let's go!

By the time he had cleaned up, changed clothes, and gotten down there, it was close to six, and the violet dusk of early autumn was closing in. Lights were winking through, one-eyed glow of street lamps, flash and flicker of neon. The rush hour crowd had thinned, people moved more leisurely, a dim cloak of peacefulness was dripping over the city. *L'heure bleu*—what a genius for expression the French had!

He strolled up to the long mahogany gleam of the bar. "Hi,

Joe," he said. "The usual."

"You bet," said the bartender. He wrought a Martini around a pickled onion, set it on the bar, and collected for it. Carsten draped himself over a stool, lit a cigaret, and felt the tension sieving out of his muscles. Idly, he looked around.

There weren't many people in as yet. Residents lingering over a cocktail before supper, a few middle-aged businessmen having a quick one before going home, a couple of anomalous transients like himself. And — and — hold on!

What a woman! *What a woman!*

He took her in slowly, savoring her with an appreciation as much esthetic as sexual. Gods in heaven, she was tall and built like a more slender Aphrodite of Milos, her skin was white with the faintest hint of gold as if the liquid metal flowed in her veins, she moved with a grace he had not thought possible to human beings. Soft blonde hair fell low over her broad forehead and then tumbled to her bare shoulders, and he'd always been a sucker for that particular bob. The face was strange, not fitting into any race he knew of — Russian? A suggestion of Mongoloid in the high cheekbones and oblique eyes, but the

nose was straight and thin, the mouth like a red flower.

After a minute or two, he grew aware of her outfit. She seemed to be as expensive as one would guess, a long evening dress of deep shimmering green hugged her, a barbarically massive gold bracelet coiled around one slim wrist and a huge fire ruby glittered in the necklace at her throat. But he noticed that her ring finger was bare, and she sat alone in the corner, half in shadow.

Her eyes swung toward him and met his stare with a cool green appraisal. Almost automatically, Carsten picked up his drink and went over to her table.

"Why, hello, there," he said. "Haven't seen you for a long time. How are things? How's Barbara?"

"Barbara?" She smiled, ever so faintly. Her voice was low and sweet, just the way it should be.

"Sure, your sister—oh, I beg your pardon, Miss. The light's bad here. I mistook you for someone else." It came to him with a dim wonder that somehow she really did look familiar. "But you do look a lot like her. Any relation? Helen Andrews, her name is."

"No," she said. "No relation."

"Well, please excuse my rudeness, then." Carsten smiled.

"May I expiate it by buying you a drink?"

"Is this a pickup?" She didn't sound angry, only mildly amused.

"If the Fates permit, though I doubt they're so kind." Carsten sat down across the little table from her. "If you want to tell me to go chase myself, I'll do so. If you're expecting someone, I'll scram. But if you can and will share half an hour with me, I'll be most grateful."

She smiled, a slow curve ending in a flash of white. "No, I'm not waiting for anyone. Stay if you like."

"Then introductions are in order," he said, wondering how in the name of Hell his ancient and whiskery approach had worked on a goddess. He'd tried more out of a sense of duty to himself than in any real hope. "I'm William Carsten, though my friends call me Hey, You."

Her eyes regarded him steadily from between incredible lashes. They were gold-flecked green, he saw — or was it gray, or a strange shade of blue? "Not the writer?" She didn't sound awed, only coolly interested. She nodded. "I've read some of your stories. They're good."

"Thank you, fair lady." Carsten signalled the waiter. "For that, I'll make you the heroine of my next."

"What's her name?" she asked.

"Why — uh — Rachaela," he blurted.

"Good," she smiled. "Let that be my *nom de guerre*, then."

This, thought Carsten, is entirely too good to be true. I walk into a bar, effortlessly strike up an acquaintance with the most gorgeous wench I've ever seen or heard of, and now she plays the game on, won't tell me her name—E. Phillips Oppenheim, here I come!

The waiter materialized beside them. "Cognac," said Rachaela.

"You don't live here, do you?" asked Carsten. "I'd've seen you before if you did."

"No, I'm from out of town," she said noncommittally. Her eyes went over him and left small shivers in their wake. "So you're the swashbuckling William Carsten. I'm disappointed not to see you wearing a cutlass."

"I left it at home," he grinned. "Always trip over the damn thing." He extended his cigars. "Smoke?"

"No, thanks. I stick to my own brand." She waved one long slim hand. "Tell me, Mr. Carsten—"

"Will."

"Will, or Hey, You. Tell me, how does it feel to be a successful writer?"

The conventional question. He returned a somewhat franker an-

swer than usual. "Who said I was successful? Oh, sure, I make a living at it, and the living gets better all the time as I sell more and move into higher-paying markets. But, somehow I never write what I'd like to."

"The Great American Novel?"

"It's been written. *Moby Dick*. And Homer sewed up the epic and Shakespeare the drama and Kipling the ballad and other people everything else so thoroughly that there's nothing left for us to do now. Just as all Western philosophy has been described as a series of footnotes to Plato, so we cannot hope to beat the masters at their own game. They were in green pastures; at best, we can only be worthy followers. All our great moderns are saying and doing nothing which wasn't said and done years or centuries ago. You can't be *original* any more . . . As for me, well, at my best I'm competent, and I know damn well I'll never exceed that. So—" He shrugged.

She nodded, slowly. "But aren't you giving up without a struggle? You're a young man, you still have to learn—"

"Oh, I'll improve, but never that much. I won't take any Nobel prizes, and I won't deserve any, even in my own conceited estimation. It's quite clear to me,

from studying my own works, including things I've tried to make really 'great.' Those are invariably the most miserable botches of all." Carsten grinned crookedly and paid for her drink as it arrived. "Sorry. I didn't mean to go off that way. Tell me about yourself."

"Oh, come now, Will, you can give me the thrill of playing mysterious *femme fatale* just for this evening, can't you?"

This evening—A rush of excitement was overlaid by a worried mental counting of his assets. Joe would cash a check for him, but it would mean staving off his rent payments and going hungry till he made his next sale . . . Devil take it! A chance like this comes once in several thousand lifetimes.

"In that case," he said, "you'll have to live up to your role, you know. Move over."

The plush seats were easily wide enough for two. He sat down beside her with a dazed feeling that all this was entirely too good to last. Unless—unless he was somehow being taken for a ride—

No, hardly. He didn't have enough money to be worth robbing, and his various indiscretions had and would continue to be such that he wouldn't give a damn about a blackmailer's

threats to publish them, and he had access to no secret information. No, no, this—Rachaela—must just be out for a good time. Maybe her boy friend had stood her up—though he'd hardly have been human then—or maybe she was an adventuress looking for amusement, or maybe—

Once in a long-drawn crap game he'd had a fantastic run of luck. He'd known that he simply couldn't lose, there had been no doubt about it, and he'd walked away at last with several hundred dollars in his pocket. It was like that again tonight. Things wouldn't go wrong, no matter what he did, because it wasn't in their nature to do so. He was "hot."

They talked for awhile; he wasn't sure what they talked about or of anything except that she was wise and witty and utterly charming and captivating. Nor was he doing so badly himself.

"Tell me, Will," she asked finally, "this story you are writing now, of which I am the heroine—what is it like?"

"It — uh — " He hesitated, shrugged, and plunged ahead. She wouldn't be offended, not on this enchanted night. "Well, you made an unfortunate choice, Rachaela. It's about an Axis spy of that name."

"Well," she smiled, "you may

not be too far off the mark."

He discovered with a pleased surprise that they were holding hands, and squeezed hers. She squeezed back. "Don't tell me you're a Russian agent. Sorry, I'm not a nuclear physicist."

"Oh, no. I'm a demon, Will, and all I want is your soul. We need writers down below." As he blinked at her in surprise, she said merely, "But go on. Tell me about this story."

For a moment he hesitated, wondering why on earth she had said it. A hell of an obscure game, and somehow it didn't sound like an affectation. But she was near and beautiful and he had the usual male desire to talk about himself and his work to a woman. She shrugged again. "Well, O Best Beloved, it's told in the first person, which is sheer wishful thinking on my part—" He related the plot in detail.

"It's not like your ordinary writing," she said.

"No. For once, it's a notion I really think is good. Only—it won't write. Comes out disgusting, like a sophomore's first discovery that he can Create Art."

"Why?" she asked. "I don't think it's that you're only fit to write adventure, Will. I've admired a lot in your work. The purely descriptive passages es-

pecially, sunrise over the sea, storms, snowfall, the creak and pitch of ships. And even your human characters come alive at times. You've talent enough to write this story, too."

He was only vaguely offended; like most modest people, he liked to be told how excellent he really was. His conscious mind admitted that she was quite right, and that it was good of her to be so honest with him. The way you'd want your wife to be honest—

"I don't know why it won't go. It just won't. Maybe it's a jinx, or a subconscious block of some kind. Or maybe it's the trouble with characterization. It's hard to show the mixed-up mess of good and evil that we all are. Nobody, even the worst villain, is all black—or white. Unless I allow your claim, I've never met or known of a real fiend. Not even a literal devil."

"How do you know?" she bantered him. "After all, no competent demon today would go around in horns and hoofs. He'd be laughed out of town. Oh, no, Will, the modern Devil is an ultra-respectable businessman, punctual as clockwork, a member of all the best clubs, with a silent partnership in an influential newspaper and a controlling vote in a key corporation; or he is a demagogue of a union leader, setting his dupes against their

own ultimate interests; or a politician hounding honest men out of public office with baseless slanders; or the power behind a dictator; or the leader of a racist group too cowardly to show its viciousness except behind masks; or—oh, any one of the million cancers in this dying civilization. You've met the agents of Hell, you meet them every day of your life."

"Speaking of course, figuratively," he said, a little uneasily. Her smile had faded and she talked so seriously, all at once.

"Not in the least." Her voice was grave, her eyes huge and luminous. "Hell has had many names, and the Devil has taken many forms; those I speak of are simply the most suitable today. In earlier days he was known as Setesh and Nergal and the Furies and Loki and Lucifer and Mara and—you reel them off. The primitive folk of Earth live closer to reality than you do, Will, and most of them recognize the truth, that this world is closer to Hell than it is to Heaven. So their gods are all demons, to be appeased rather than worshipped. Your new mythology is beginning to recognize that fact, under still another switch of names. They talk of the second law of thermodynamics, now, you know, and of the subconscious mind; and wave mechanics

suggests at least one other universe may co-exist with ours—Oh, yes, whatever you choose to call it, Hell is a fact."

"First girl I ever heard talk that way. What are you, a mystic?"

"No. Goodness, no!" She laughed, a low and lovely sound. "I'm just a lady demon out after your soul, Will."

"You've got it already, I'm afraid," he grinned, glad to be back in the more comfortable realm of persiflage. She was a strange, contradictory sort. "But I still have an inner man. What say to a spot of supper?"

"I say yes." Her smile left him weak in the knees. "If you'll excuse me while I go powder my nose, as the euphemism has it—"

He watched her move away. She was like a panther, a hovering falcon, a flowing stream, like music and laughter and forgotten springtimes. Shaking his head, dazedly, he went over to the bar.

"Cash a large-ish check, Joe?" he asked.

"I guess so. My tires need a retread." Joe clicked his tongue admiringly. "Man, oh, man, you sure pick 'em. Who is she?"

"Old friend." They didn't approve of pickups in the Mar-grave. "But isn't she staying here?" If she was, he could get

her name and address from the desk.

"Nope. Never saw her before in my life, worse luck. She came in just a minute or two before you did." Joe gave Carsten a sharp glance, but shrugged leniently and cashed his check. A hundred and fifty bucks — that should see him through tonight, whatever they did, and if he couldn't get an advance out of his agent or a loan from a friend he could live on spaghetti and memories for a while.

Rachaela came back and he helped her into her coat. It looked as costly as the rest of her get-up, a sleek and shining thing of a dark fur he couldn't identify.

"What animal gave up the ghost for this?" he asked.

"Scythian gryphon," she said, and took his arm. Since she was obviously determined to have her game, he let it go at that, saying only:

"It died in a good cause. I would suggest the Tzigari. Nice and small sort of place, Hungarian, and the chef loves his work."

"Sounds like fun." She leaned against him in a way that wrapped a curtain of intimacy about them, even on the street.

He kissed her in the taxi. She hung back a moment, then

responded as he'd never been responded to before. After quite a few centuries the bells stopped ringing and the birds sang more quietly and all the sunbeams danced to a halt and glowed inside him. She sighed happily and relaxed against his shoulder.

"Psychologists," said Carsten dizzily, "tell us that love at first sight is childish. Don't just sit there, honey—change me!"

She laughed again, soft and low, and the little bells woke up once more.

"Rachaela," he whispered. His lips brushed her hair, the sweet wild smell of it hung in his nostrils with a whisper of springtime that he would never forget. Ever afterward, he knew, he would be haunted by the fragrance of her hair.

"Rachaela, who are you? Where are you from? How do I rate this?"

"You're a nice guy, Will." She kissed him again. When he woke up, the taxi was pulling to a halt.

They entered a dim anteroom and checked their coats. The headwaiter scuttled up, a lean dark man with something feline in his gait, and bowed. "Good evening, sir. Villkom."

"Small and secluded," said Carsten.

"Yes, sir." The man stiffened. His eyes fastened on Rachaela and widened. For an instant,

there was something ugly in his face. Fear, crawling out of the dark cellars of his brain, fear and an old inherited hate and—

Rachaela gave him a cool green stare. He dropped his eyes, bowed again, and led the way inside but it was with the walk of a badly rattled man.

"Now what in—" Carsten paused. What had it been? A fleeting shift of expression, a shaken demeanor—he was suddenly angry, angry and puzzled both. He took a long step, as if to whirl the man around and poke him one for looking at *her* that way. Rachaela's hand stopped him.

"Will, don't," she murmured.

"What was the matter? Do you know him?" Carsten whispered the words.

"No. I must look like someone he does know." She grinned at him. "I seem to look like quite a few other people tonight."

"That was a dodge, and you know it," he answered, shoving the darkness back down into the bottom of his mind where it belonged. Not tonight, not tonight. "But I still don't see why—"

"I told you. I'm a demon out to buy your soul, and he, being a Romany, could sense what I am. Obviously that's the answer. For he's either right or insane. But an insane man could not be

a headwaiter, he wouldn't be able to snub the patrons. Therefore he's correct as to my nature. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*"

"Shucks, you spoiled one of my quotations for me. I know three and only three Latin phrases, which I roll out sonorously on appropriate occasions, thus giving the impression of being highly educated. That was one of them."

"And the others—?"

"*De gustibus non disputandum est. Anguis in herba.* There, now I've said 'em, so we can relax and be lowbrows for the rest of the evening."

"But you're not a lowbrow," she said when they were seated. It was small and dark here, a niche in which they sat looking out over the dimly lit room. The other diners seemed very far away, the strolling gypsy players very near. "You're quite an intelligent and well-read man, Will. You could do great things if you cared to. Why are you by your own admission a second-rate writer when you could be a first-rater in any of a dozen other fields?"

"Such as what? No, honey, I held down several jobs before discovering I could write saleable fiction. Farmhand, lumberjack, grocery clerk, on up to fairly exotic things like deckhand on a sponge boat and janitor in

an observatory. I have a B.A. degree in chemistry, too, and my professor wanted me to go on for a Ph.D. It's not that I haven't tried a lot of things."

"And been good at them. If you'd stayed with one—"

"Ah, there's the trouble, macushla. Specializing. So I could have been a chemist of some note. So I could have stayed in the grocery business and been a millionaire at fifty. Maybe so. But damn it, there are other things in life than the synthesis of parachlorothiazeostrichide or the current wholesale price of grapefruit. I'm not one of these first-rate geniuses who can be great names in science, learn a dozen languages and their literatures, travel round the world, have a significant voice in national policy, and write a book on a new philosophy they've worked out in odd moments—beside a score of other things. I haven't got what it takes to be a universalist, and won't submit to the jail of being a specialist. So I'm a dilettante."

"You write saleable fiction and unsaleable poetry," she nodded. "You paint and sculp a little, not at all badly. You read books on every conceivable subject and argue with specialist friends of yours on their own grounds, which leaves you on the defensive but also learning from

them. You travel as much as you can afford. You feel at home in waterfront dives and the Diamond Horsehoe, with truck drivers and college professors. You are pretty much of a hedonist, but you'd like to be more."

"You do understand, don't you?" he murmured. "Yeah, that's about it, Rachaela. And writing is the closest a person of my limitations can come to universalism. It touches every field; in a shadowy sort of fashion, you live in all space and time. And you're pretty much your own boss, choose your own working hours and working pace, knock off for months at a time and take a leisurely jaunt somewhere whenever you've accumulated the money. If at times it seems rather futile, playing with toys you should have put away long ago, well, that's part of the price."

He sipped his cocktail moodily. "*Carpe diem*, too. It seems useless and wasteful to plan very far ahead these days. Any thinking man can see the world is going to smash. Why sacrifice and save and look to a high goal ten years off, when you know that before those ten years are up there'll be war again, and ruin, and you yanked into service or some damned dreary war job—and economic and social chaos to follow, when it'll be all that

anyone can do to keep himself and his dependents above water? I'm just living from day to day, Rachaela, enjoying myself while I can, because there's really nothing else that's possible for me." He smiled wearily. "Maybe you're right, Maybe Hell is very close to us today."

"It is," she said soberly. "Very near."

"Well, tell me, then, most charming of devils—" He forced a lightness into his tone, seeking to recover their gaiety. "Give me the inside dope. What's it like? What is Hell, really? It's been variously described as bitter cold and white-hot, the home of all merry gentlemen and an eternity of boredom, aristocratic and bourgeois, everything and nothing. Come on, now, let's have the truth!"

Suddenly she shuddered, and leaned over against him. Her hand sought his, as if for comfort, and it was cold. Her eyes were wide, staring at him from a shining blankness, and her voice dropped to a shaky whisper.

"It is terrible," she said slowly. "It is all and none, flame and ice, howling chaos and frozen stasis, and it screams with the horror of being eternal— Oh, no, darling, don't ask me again!"

She gulped her drink and he watched her with a narrowed

gaze, wondering if she might be insane and knowing that if she were, if she suddenly mouthed meaningless slaver at him and grinned from empty eyes, he would be damned to his own private hell for the rest of his life.

She laughed at him, a sudden warm pulse of mirth and sweetness. It was as if he saw winter ending, ice breaking on a river and buds on a willow and a steel-gray sky cloven by sunlight. He joined in, a bit too loudly in his relief.

"Oh, Will," she said. "Oh, my poor hardheaded scientifically trained agnostic! You know, I think you actually believed that!"

"Heh! Next time, don't be quite so good an actress, honey. Ah, here comes the soup."

Twice in the course of the meal he asked her to marry him. She laughed and stroked his cheek and did not answer, and the evening had wings. The fiddlers came over to their table and played for them, a lilting old air which set her feet to tapping out the rhythm and her voice to humming the melody. When they had gone she went on humming, a strange little tune which found its way into Carsten's head and made itself at home and started telling him of things he had forgotten. He remem-

bered sunset over a quiet lake, a trembling bridge of moonlight on a tropic sea, the touch of his mother's hands. The corner was suddenly full of ghosts.

"Who wrote that?" he asked.

"That? Oh—you mean that song? I don't know. It's very old. They say that Hecuba sang her children to sleep with it, long ago in windy Troy. But this night is young."

"Is that a hint? How about going somewhere that we can dance, after we finish here?"

She was like another part of him—no, more, they were both part of the same, they swayed through a blue twilight where white water poured down a cliff of sounding crystal, they were one with the fireflies glimmering in cool dusk and the slow wheeling of stars and the sobbing, crying music. She could dance!

Then there was another place, noisy and smoky, full of beer smell and boisterous laboring men, and her laughter was a red flame pulsing through the racket and she kissed him till his head spun and the soft hair tumbled past her flushed cheeks.

They were in the shadowy interior of a car, going somewhere else, light flickering over her face as they went past vague buildings, darkness slipping back when they crossed quieter streets and deserted sections.

"Who are you, Rachaela? Who are you?"

"I've told you time and again, I am a demon assigned to get your soul. What price are you asking, sir?"

"Will you marry me?"

"You don't want to marry a career girl, do you? Especially one with my career . . . Will, my dress . . . oh, well . . . mmm . . ."

Somehow, it didn't seem strange that they should walk through a great flowering garden where huge white blooms nodded overhead and filled the night with perfume. They were swimming then, plunging into a cool lake, laughing and playing tag, crawling out on a mossy bank to let the warm moonlit air dry them.

"Sure it's not a case of mistaken identity? You look more like an angel to me."

"Oh, no, just a hard-working white-collar devil."

"But what would—*he*—want with human souls, anyway? As if we mattered to the Principle of Universal Evil."

"We do. Believe me, not the smallest thing is without meaning."

"And what becomes of—the damned?"

She shuddered, and he laid an arm about her shoulders. "All right, Rachaela, I'm sorry, I won't ask again. Only I assure

you Hell would be Paradise enow, if you are there too."

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Her voice grew thin and shrill. He kissed her fear and his own away.

Later, quite prosaically, they were down in a tavern in the Village, surrounded by several of Carsten's madder friends, consuming beer and settling the problems of the universe.

"Theogamy," said Charleston. "Theogamy, that's the only solution."

"Poor etymology," clucked the Professor.

"Etymology," said Maryanne, "is the study of insects. Buy me a beer, insect."

"Where *did* you find this goddess, W. C.?" asked young Jones. He was sitting at Rachaela's feet, worshipping her.

"I told you," grinned Carsten. "I'm gathering material for a story on demoniac possession. She's my demon."

"It just goes to prove the basic injustice of a mad society," declared Swenson. "You, my dear W. C., sit on your fat can four hours a day, four days a week, forty weeks a year, and grind out pure, unadulterated garbage, pandering to the tasteless millions, and you wallow in money, simply wallow in it, sleep on mattresses stuffed with it, I say,

have gorgeous women at your beck and call, bathe in champagne, whereas I, who have not only the first original thing to say since Gautama, but have invented a whole new system of expression to say it in, starve for my art. Can I borrow ten bucks?"

"No," said Carsten. It was a ritual between them.

"Oh, well, there's always beer," said Swenson. He buried his nose in foam, came up for air, and sang mournfully:

*"Jag tipspar att jag supar maj
ihjel en dag till slut,
nar Fanden tar sjalan min
och kroppan kastas ut—"*

Carsten joined in, and they went on to *Cathusalem*, *The Jolly Tinker*, and *Les Trois Orfèvres*.

"And now for some sophistication," he said later, and they found themselves after a rather wonderful while in the newest and most fashionable night club the cab driver could locate.

"Who was seen where on what evening with which ex-wife of guess who?" he smiled. His head was whirling, he was a little drunk, but it was more with her than with alcohol. "Let's be different, Rachaela. Let's get married and come here again as man and wife. If they don't throw us out for it."

"You're very sweet, Will," she

murmured, and her answering smile was soft.

"You want to buy my soul?" he asked a bit wildly. "Sure, it's for sale. Price, one marriage. To you. For permanent."

"You could get more than that, Will."

"What more would I want?"

"Oh—money, power, intelligence, energy, everything in life. You could become great in all fields of human work if you wanted to. You could write the finest piece of literature Earth will ever see."

"Hm. I'll consider it. Smoke?"

"No, thanks, I told you I preferred my own. They're rather strong. Here—" She fished a case out of her big, medieval-looking purse and handed it to him. He slid one out for her and took another himself, experimentally. Before he could light them, a dragon flew out of her purse—a very small dragon, scarcely four inches long, exquisite and golden. It hovered in the air, lit their cigarets with a puff of flame, and popped back into its nest. He had to admit it was a good stunt.

The tobacco was too strong for him. He gasped, wiped the tears from his eyes, and stubbed it out. Rachaela smiled lazily and blew an acrid cloud at him.

"I told you I was a demon," she said, too casually.

"Now I believe it," he answered, more than half truthfully but not feeling surprised. After all, this was an enchanted evening.

"Hullo, Carsten, where'd you get this delicious piece of flesh?"

Carsten looked up, scowling. He had always disliked Tommy Delmarr, though he had to put up with the pest once in a while. "Beat it," he said.

"When so sharmin' a damsel is right to hand? No, no, no." Tommy sat down and leered vacantly at Rachaela. "Name, addressh, phone number?"

"Tommy," said Carsten, "I give you just one second to get away from here. Then I'm going to throw a punch at you."

"Ah, shaddap." Tommy leaned over, reaching for Rachaela's hand.

"I really mean it."

"Look, beautiful, how 'bout leavin' this character an' comin' over t' our table—"

Carsten stood up. With a savage glee quite foreign to his usually mild nature, he hauled Tommy erect, belted him once in the stomach, and followed with a right to the jaw that sent him across the adjoining table. And somehow that was the last touch needed to make the evening perfect.

What happened afterward, he wasn't very sure, but presently

he and Rachaela were standing on the roof of the Empire State Building. How it had been done, he didn't know either, but it was nice to be alone again.

The moon was high and nearly full, riding through a deep-blue sky of stars and ghostly clouds. The city winked and blazed below them, mile after mile of it, fire and fury and the arrogance of man, and they stood above it all, looking down.

His gaze traveled to Rachaela. In the streaming moonlight her proud and lovely face was white, remote and mysterious, softened to a wistful beauty that seemed at the verge of tears. A line from Rupert Brooke crossed his mind: "*The lordliest lass of earth*"—and he nodded, slowly.

"Darling, darling!" He kissed her, laid his cheek to hers and buried his face in the tumbled waves of her hair. Her cheek was soft and smooth and cold in the keen fall night. "Oh darling, I love you so much—"

"Will—" She pulled herself against him, close, huddling to him like a child. "Will, Will—" Her breath sobbed in her throat.

"You will marry me, won't you? I'll not sell my soul for anything less."

"I really am damned, you know. I'm a demon from Hell."

"Sure, I know." He saw that her eyes shone with their own

green light, up here in the dark and the thin whimpering wind. Gently, he ruffled the heavy hair back from her forehead and kissed the small horns. "What of it? I love you."

She laughed, shakily, and tears dimmed the cold fire of her eyes. Breaking away from him, but clinging to one hand, she said in an unsteady voice: "But this isn't according to the rules at all. I'm supposed to take you up on a high place and show you all the riches of the world and offer you what you will of them."

She gestured at the sea of flame below. "It can be yours, Will, yours to rule for a hundred years. Make what you want of it. Make a world of peace and sanity, where a man can think beyond the next day. They'll bless your name forever, and he won't mind, because time is long and the agents of Hell are many. You can sound out the world's deepest knowledge, Will, you can play on its heart as if on a harp, you can drink every cup of Earth to its bottom and there will be no dregs in your wine. Your shadow can fall over all of human history, man to the end of his existence will remember you and bear the stamp you chose to put on him, you, the happy god of Earth." She laughed, and the

sound was wild and brittle.
"Take it!"

"I only want you," he said, watching the moonlight play its frosty fingers over her hair. The wind whined and nuzzled under his coat, he shivered and stamped his feet and heard the noise ring loud under the moon.
"I only want you, Rachaela."

"You can have that too," she whispered, so softly he could barely hear it. She was looking down at the floor, her face was in shadow. "But why not take the rest as well?"

"Oh, all right. For a hundred years, my darling." He tilted her chin up and saw the tears glimmering in the cold colorless moonlight.

"It's a high price to pay then." Her voice was almost a croak. She wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Then isn't now. Bring on your parchment, Rachaela, and don't forget a needle for my blood." He laughed, and there was only joy in him, his heart was laughing too, so softly, so softly.

"Come on, then!" She grabbed his hand and whirled around.

There was an instant of darkness, and they were in his room. His room, his old disordered shabby lodging, but now a haze of red and gold drifted through it, the fragrance of flowers and

her hair, someone was singing in a high lovely voice and bells were crying their mirth to all the world.

"Oh, darling, darling, darling!" He grabbed her close and kissed her, again and again, as if he could never have enough. And he never would, not ever in his hundred years.

"I love you," he said.

"And I—love you too, Will." Her lips brushed his, soft as the touch of sunlight, sweet as the first springtime in Eden. "I love you too."

"Bring on the contract," he said. "Come on, let's get that part of it over with so I can have you all the sooner."

"Will—wait—" He saw the tears again, shining on her cheeks. "You ought to know what it means. You'll be damned forever."

"I've made my choice, haven't I? It's worth it. Well worth it."

"But *forever*—Will, you have no concept of Hell. You cannot imagine what it is. Your worst nightmares, the foulest thoughts that ever welled from a diseased brain, flame that burns you alive, hopelessness and misery—Will, none of them touch what *he* does!" Rachaela shook, as if it were suddenly cold amid the swirling golden mists. "Will, Hell is Hell, and it *never* ends—"

He read the panic crawling

behind her eyes. His voice harshened. "Why are you afraid? What did they do to you there?"

"I'm a demon." Her teeth rattled together, and she crept into his arms and hid her face against his breast. "We're a p-privileged class, yes, b-b-but we're with the damned too, and the punishments for failure—" She sucked her breath in, fighting for control.

"You're not going to fail, Rachaela." He strained her to him. "Give me that contract."

"But Will—Will—you'll be among the damned then, you'll be in Hell forever and forever, worlds will crumble and the sun fall to ash before they've well begun with you, and it will last for all eternity—"

She shook her head, slowly, and freed herself. For a moment she stood with her head bowed, the long shining hair sweeping down past her face, and he saw that she was crying.

"I can't do it," she gasped.

"Rachaela—" He took a step forward, and the sudden knowledge was a desolation within him.

"No, Will, I won't do it, I won't, they can do what they want to me but I won't—I love you, Will. Always and forever, I love you." Her mouth trembled into a pathetic smile. "They

think that'll be part of my punishment, but they're wrong. It will be the one thing I have through all those centuries till—till—" She shivered, and finished dully: "Till they decide I've had enough, and send me back to work."

"Rachaela," he whispered.

"No, no, I can't stay now. The quicker, the better, Will." She came back into his arms. "Good-bye—"

He held her close, held her for a very long time, knowing that she would go and not wasting his time in begging her to stay. His heart did that for him. And then she was gone, and he stood alone in his room. It smelt of stale cigarette smoke, and an unshaded bulb glared from the ceiling.

He wished he could cry, but he seemed empty of tears, empty and hollow, as if they really had ripped the soul out of him. Tomorrow he might start thinking and feeling again, but it wasn't in him now.

He looked at the manuscript on his desk. *Rachaela*, he thought drearily. He took the sheets up one by one and crumpled them and threw them in the wastebasket. Then he went over to his dresser and took out a bottle.

About half a fifth, he estimated dimly. It should last him till the bars opened again.

THE

COOKIE LADY

BY PHILIP K. DICK

ILLUSTRATED BY BEECHAM

How plump he was, the little boy, sitting just a little distance from her, his cheeks red and full! She could touch him, he was so close. He had come for her cookies, and he should have them . . . indeed, he should. . . .

"Where you going, Bubber?" Ernie Mill shouted from across the street, fixing papers for his route.

"No place," Bubber Surle said.

"You going to see your lady friend?" Ernie laughed and laughed. "What do you go visit that old lady for? Let us in on it!"

Bubber went on. He turned the corner and went down Elm Street. Already, he could see the house, at the end of the street, set back a little on the lot. The front of the house was overgrown with weeds, old dry weeds that rustled and chattered in the wind. The house itself was a little gray box, shabby and unpainted, the porch steps sagging. There was an old weather-beaten rocking chair on the porch with

a torn piece of cloth hanging over it.

Bubber went up the walk. As he started up the rickety steps he took a deep breath. He could smell it, the wonderful warm smell, and his mouth began to water. His heart thudding with anticipation, Bubber turned the handle of the bell. The bell grated rustily on the other side of the door. There was silence for a time, then the sounds of someone stirring.

Mrs. Drew opened the door. She was old, very old, a little dried-up old lady, like the weeds that grew along the front of the house. She smiled down at Bubber, holding the door wide for him to come in.

"You're just in time," she said. "Come on inside, Bernard.

You're just in time—they're just now ready."

Bubber went to the kitchen door and looked in. He could see them, resting on a big blue plate on top of the stove. Cookies, a plate of warm, fresh cookies right out of the oven. Cookies with nuts and raisins in them!

"How do they look?" Mrs. Drew said. She rustled past him, into the kitchen. "And maybe some cold milk, too. You like cold milk with them." She got the milk pitcher from the window box on the back porch. Then she poured a glass of milk for him and set some of the cookies on a small plate. "Let's go into the living room," she said.

Bubber nodded. Mrs. Drew carried the milk and the cookies in and set them on the arm of the couch. Then she sat down in her own chair, watching Bubber plop himself down by the plate and begin to help himself.

Bubber ate greedily, as usual, intent on the cookies, silent except for chewing sounds. Mrs. Drew waited patiently, until the boy had finished, and his already ample sides bulged that much more. When Bubber was done with the plate he glanced toward the kitchen again, at the rest of the cookies on the stove.

"Wouldn't you like to wait until later for the rest?" Mrs. Drew said.

"All right," Bubber agreed.

"How were they?"

"Fine."

"That's good." She leaned back in her chair. "Well, what did you do in school today? How did it go?"

"All right."

The little old lady watched the boy look restlessly around the room. "Bernard," she said presently, "won't you stay and talk to me for awhile?" He had some books on his lap, some school books. "Why don't you read to me from your books? You know, I don't see too well any more and it's a comfort to me to be read to."

"Can I have the rest of the cookies after?"

"Of course."

Bubber moved over toward her, to the end of the couch. He opened his books, *World Geography*, *Principles of Arithmetic*, *Hoyte's Speller*. "Which do you want?"

She hesitated. "The geography."

Bubber opened the big blue book at random. PERU. "Peru is bounded on the north by Ecuador and Colombia, on the south by Chile, and on the east by Brazil and Bolivia. Peru is divided into three main sections. These are, first—"

The little old lady watched him read, his fat cheeks wob-



bling as he read, holding his finger next to the line. She was silent, watching him, studying the boy intently as he read, drinking in each frown of concentration, every motion of his arms and hands. She relaxed, letting herself sink back in her chair. He was very close to her, only a little way off. There was only the table and lamp between them. How nice it was to have him come; he had been coming for over a month, now, ever since the day she had been sitting on her porch and seen him go by and thought to call to him, pointing to the cookies by her rocker.

Why had she done it? She did not know. She had been alone so long that she found herself saying strange things and doing strange things. She saw so few people, only when she went down to the store, or the mailman came with her pension check. Or the garbage men.

The boy's voice droned on. She was comfortable, peaceful and relaxed. The little old lady closed her eyes and folded her hands in her lap. And as she sat, dozing and listening, something began to happen. The little old lady was beginning to change, her gray wrinkles and lines dimming away. As she sat in the chair she was growing younger,

the thin fragile body filling out with youth again. The gray hair thickened and darkened, color coming to the wispy strands. Her arms filled, too, the mottled flesh turning a rich hue as it had been once, many years before.

Mrs. Drew breathed deeply, not opening her eyes. She could feel *something* happening, but she did not know just what. *Something* was going on; she could feel it, and it was good. But what it was she did not exactly know. It had happened before, almost every time the boy came and sat by her. Especially of late, since she had moved her chair nearer to the couch. She took a deep breath. How good it felt, the warm fullness, a breath of warmth inside her cold body for the first time in years!

In her chair the little old lady had become a dark-haired matron of perhaps thirty, a woman with full cheeks and plump arms and legs. Her lips were red again, her neck even a little too fleshy, as it had been once in the long forgotten past.

Suddenly the reading stopped. Bubber put down his book and stood up. "I have to go," he said. "Can I take the rest of the cookies with me?"

She blinked, rousing herself. The boy was in the kitchen, fill-

ing his pockets with cookies. She nodded, dazed, still under the spell. The boy took the last cookie. He went across the living room to the door. Mrs. Drew stood up. All at once the warmth left her. She felt tired, tired and very dry. She caught her breath, breathing quickly. She looked down at her hands. Wrinkled, thin.

"Oh!" she murmured. Tears blurred her eyes. It was gone, gone again as soon as he moved away. She tottered to the mirror above the mantel and looked at herself. Old faded eyes stared back, eyes deep-set in a withered face. Gone, all gone, as soon as the boy had left her side.

"I'll see you later," Bubber said.

"Please," she whispered. "Please come back again. Will you come back?"

"Sure," Bubber said listlessly. He pushed the door open. "Good-bye." He went down the steps. In a moment she heard his shoes against the sidewalk. He was gone.

"Bubber, you come in here!" May Surle stood angrily on the porch. "You get in here and sit down at the table."

"All right." Bubber came slowly up onto the porch, pushing inside the house.

"What's the matter with you?"

She caught his arm. "Where you been? Are you sick?"

"I'm tired." Bubber rubbed his forehead.

His father came through the living room with the newspaper, in his undershirt. "What's the matter?" he said.

"Look at him," May Surle said. "All worn out. What you been doing, Bubber?"

"He's been visiting that old lady," Ralf Surle said. "Can't you tell? He's always washed out after he's been visiting her. What do you go there for, Bub? What goes on?"

"She gives him cookies," May said. "You know how he is about things to eat. He'd do anything for a plate of cookies."

"Bub," his father said, "listen to me. I don't want you hanging around that crazy old lady any more. Do you hear me? I don't care how many cookies she gives you. You come home too tired! No more of that. You hear me?"

Bubber looked down at the floor, leaning against the door. His heart beat heavily, labored. "I told her I'd come back," he muttered.

"You can go once more," May said, going into the dining room, "but only once more. Tell her you won't be able to come back again, though. You make sure you tell her nice. Now go upstairs and get washed up."

"After dinner better have him lie down," Ralf said, looking up the stairs, watching Bubber climb slowly, his hand on the bannister. He shook his head. "I don't like it," he murmured. "I don't want him going there any more. There's something strange about that old lady."

"Well, it'll be the last time," May said.

Wednesday was warm and sunny. Bubber strode along, his hands in his pockets. He stopped in front of McVane's drug store for a minute, looking speculatively at the comic books. At the soda fountain a woman was drinking a big chocolate soda. The sight of it made Bubber's mouth water. That settled it. He turned and continued on his way, even increasing his pace a little.

A few minutes later he came up onto the gray sagging porch and rang the bell. Below him the weeds blew and rustled with the wind. It was almost four o'clock; he could not stay too long. But then, it was the last time anyhow.

The door opened. Mrs. Drew's wrinkled face broke into smiles. "Come in, Bernard. It's good to see you standing there. It makes me feel so young again to have you come visit."

He went inside, looking around.

"I'll start the cookies. I didn't know if you were coming." She padded into the kitchen. "I'll get them started right away. You sit down on the couch."

Bubber went over and sat down. He noticed that the table and lamp were gone; the chair was right up next to the couch. He was looking at the chair in perplexity when Mrs. Drew came rustling back into the room.

"They're in the oven. I had the batter all ready. Now." She sat down in the chair with a sigh. "Well, how did it go today? How was school?"

"Fine."

She nodded. How plump he was, the little boy, sitting just a little distance from her, his cheeks red and full! She could touch him, he was so close. Her aged heart thumped. Ah, to be young again. Youth was so much. It was everything. What did the world mean to the old? *When all the world is old, lad. . .*

"Do you want to read to me, Bernard?" she asked presently.

"I didn't bring any books."

"Oh." She nodded. "Well, I have some books," she said quickly. "I'll get them."

She got up, crossing to the bookcase. As she opened the doors, Bubber said, "Mrs. Drew, my father says I can't come here any more. He says this is

the last time. I thought I'd tell you."

She stopped, standing rigid. Everything seemed to leap around her, the room twisting furiously. She took a harsh, frightened breath. "Bernard, you're — you're not coming back?"

"No, my father says not to."

There was silence. The old lady took a book at random and came slowly back to her chair. After awhile she passed the book to him, her hands trembling. The boy took it without expression, looking at its cover.

"Please read, Bernard. Please."

"All right." He opened the book. "Where'll I start?"

"Anywhere. Anywhere, Bernard."

He began to read. It was something by Trollope; she only half heard the words. She put her hand to her forehead, the dry skin, brittle and thin, like old paper. She trembled with anguish. The last time?

Bubber read on, slowly, monotonously. Against the window a fly buzzed. Outside the sun began to set, the air turning cool. A few clouds came up, and the wind in the trees rushed furiously.

The old lady sat, close by the boy, closer than ever, hearing

him read, the sound of his voice, sensing him close by. Was this really the last time? Terror rose up in her and she pushed it back. The last time! She gazed at him, the boy sitting so close to her. After a time she reached out her thin, dry hand. She took a deep breath. He would never be back. There would be no more times, no more. This was the last time he would sit there.

She touched his arm.

Bubber looked up. "What is it?" he murmured.

"You don't mind if I touch your arm, do you?"

"No, I guess not." He went on reading. The old lady could feel the youngness of him, flowing between her fingers, through her arm. A pulsating, vibrating youngness, so close to her. It had never been that close, where she could actually touch it. The feel of life made her dizzy, unsteady.

And presently it began to happen, as before. She closed her eyes, letting it move over her, filling her up, carried into her by the sound of the voice and the feel of the arm. The change, the glow, was coming over her, the warm, rising feeling. She was blooming again, filling with life, swelling into richness, as she had been, once, long ago.

She looked down at her arms. Rounded, they were, and the nails clear. Her hair. Black

again, heavy and black against her neck. She touched her cheek. The wrinkles were gone, the skin pliant and soft.

Joy filled her, a growing, bursting joy. She stared around her, at the room. She smiled, feeling her firm teeth and gums, red lips, strong white teeth. Suddenly she got to her feet, her body secure and confident. She turned a little, a lithe, quick circle.

Bubber stopped reading. "Are the cookies ready?" he said.

"I'll see." Her voice was alive, deep with a quality that had dried out many years before. Now it was there again, *her* voice, throaty and sensual. She walked quickly to the kitchen and opened the oven. She took out the cookies and put them on top of the stove.

"All ready," she called gaily. "Come and get them."

Bubber came past her, his gaze fastened on the sight of the cookies. He did not even notice the woman by the door.

Mrs. Drew hurried from the kitchen. She went into the bedroom, closing the door after her. Then she turned, gazing into the full-length mirror on the door. Young—She was young again, filled out with the sap of vigorous youth. She took a deep breath, her steady bosom

swelling. Her eyes flashed, and she smiled. She spun, her skirts flying. Young and lovely.

And this time it had not gone away.

She opened the door. Bubber had filled his mouth and his pockets. He was standing in the center of the living room, his face fat and dull, a dead white.

"What's the matter?" Mrs. Drew said.

"I'm going."

"All right, Bernard. And thanks for coming to read to me." She laid her hand on his shoulder. "Perhaps I'll see you again sometime."

"My father—"

"I know." She laughed gaily, opening the door for him. "Good-bye, Bernard. Good-bye."

She watched him go slowly down the steps, one at a time. Then she closed the door and skipped back into the bedroom. She unfastened her dress and stepped out of it, the worn gray fabric suddenly distasteful to her. For a brief second she gazed at her full, rounded body, her hands on her hips.

She laughed with excitement, turning a little, her eyes bright. What a wonderful body, bursting with life. A swelling breast—she touched herself. The flesh was firm. There was so much, so many things to do! She gazed about her, breathing quickly. So

many things! She started the water running in the bathtub and then went to tie her hair up.

The wind blew around him as he trudged home. It was late, the sun had set and the sky overhead was dark and cloudy. The wind that blew and nudged against him was cold, and it penetrated through his clothing, chilling him. The boy felt tired, his head ached, and he stopped every few minutes, rubbing his forehead and resting, his heart laboring. He left Elm Street and went up Pine. The wind screeched around him, pushing him from side to side. He shook his head, trying to clear it. How weary he was, how tired his arms and legs were. He felt the wind hammering at him, pushing and plucking at him.

He took a breath and went on, his head down. At the corner he stopped, holding onto a lamp-post. The sky was quite dark, the street lights were beginning to come on. At last he went on, walking as best he could.

"Where is that boy?" May Surle said, going out on the porch for the tenth time. Ralf flicked on the light and they stood together. "What an awful wind."

The wind whistled and lashed at the porch. The two of them looked up and down the dark street, but they could see nothing but a few newspapers and trash being blown along.

"Let's go inside," Ralf said. "He sure is going to get a licking when he gets home."

They sat down at the dinner table. Presently May put down her fork. "Listen! Do you hear something?"

Ralf listened.

Outside, against the front door, there was a faint sound, a tapping sound. He stood up. The wind howled outside, blowing the shades in the room upstairs. "I'll go see what it is," he said.

He went to the door and opened it. Something gray, something gray and dry was blowing up against the porch, carried by the wind. He stared at it, but he could not make it out. A bundle of weeds, weeds and rags blown by the wind, perhaps.

The bundle bounced against his legs. He watched it drift past him, against the wall of the house. Then he closed the door again slowly.

"What was it?" May called.

"Just the wind," Ralf Surle said.

Sylvia

BY PETER PHILLIPS

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

To know Sylvia was to die or to go mad. She was the most cunning of femmes fatales, the most dangerous. She laughed her way through affairs and took what she wanted. Capricious, vivacious — and clumsy!





I appeared young and impressionable at the time. That's why they sent me to interview Silvia Thwaite, after she'd given the bum's rush—by proxy, in the form of a doting janitor—to older and wiser newspapermen.

Michaels, managing editor now—he was on the City desk then—told me so as we sat at dinner.

"The idea," he admitted, "was that she would take pity on you, a fresh-faced young kid just from college on his first assignment, and invite you in to tea or something. Even if she didn't talk, we could've written up a story on that angle."

"Take pity on me?" I grimaced sourly. Remembering Silvia, I felt chilled inside, despite Michaels' after-dinner brandy.

Femme fatale has an oddly passé ring now, bringing with it the musty flavor of a prolix nineteenth century novel in which languorous, seductive sirens floated through fashionable salons leaving a trail of shattered hearts. They were always languorous. And nearly always brunette.

Silvia Thwaite was a lively blonde, but *femme fatale* certainly fitted her. She was fatal all right. And not merely to hearts.

As I crossed the hallway of her apartment block the morning after Moreno's suicide, making for the elevator, a janitor

slipped out from an understairs cubby-hole and barred my way.

"Who'd you want?"

I told him, and asked how it came to be his business.

"I make it mine, see?" he growled.

"Are you the house manager?"

"Maybe I ain't, but if Miss Silvia don't want to talk to you, I'll see you don't bother her any. I already tossed out three guys who tried to bust in on her. I'm coming up."

She'd evidently got him on a string too. I shrugged. He rode up with me, silent, scowling.

There were two reporters and a photographer lounging in the corridor outside the Thwaite apartment. The photographer angled round for a shot as the door opened to my ring. A flash-bulb flared.

Silvia Thwaite said, "Why don't you boys take a rest? I'm making no statements except to the coroner."

"We know what that'll be," one of them sneered. "'He was just a friend. I'm so terribly broken up about the whole thing.'"

She ignored it, looked at me coolly. Her eyes felt my football muscles. It was almost a physical contact. A blush started up from the base of my neck. I was that

young. And a photograph hadn't prepared me for those eyes.

They were smoky blue, of a color I had seen before only in the eyes of a blind dog. These were not blind.

"Who is sylvia,

What is she,

*That all her swains commend
her . . .?"*

The old song nagged the back of my brain.

"You a newspaper man?"

I took off my hat. "I'd like to talk to you privately."

"Oh, he'd like to talk to her pwivately," jeered the mimic in a quite creditable imitation of my Boston.

Michaels, subtle devil, had arranged with him by phone to say something like that. The play worked.

"Maybe he can," said Silvia Thwaite. "Come in."

"Whadda you know," murmured the other reporter. "Hey!" He made a rush. The janitor strongarmed him back, and the door was closed in his face, with me inside.

"Sammy is quite a watch-dog," she said.

"What's his pay?"

It was my subconscious, antagonized in some indefinable fashion by the girl, that slipped in that remark. Or perhaps an ancient instinct, long dormant in civilized minds.

I would have apologized but as she looked at me intently her enamel-red lips twisted into a smile and she said, "Not in the best of taste, brother. But I shall be disappointed if you apologize. You hate me, don't you?"

My stomach balled-up and reality crumbled a little round the edges.

"Why on earth should I hate you? I'm seeing you for the first time—except for newspaper photographs."

"Are you sure?" She saw my puzzlement and laughed. "Forget it—for the moment. And come in here."

No request for my name and business. Maybe she'd read that in my mind too.

I had half-expected exotic gloom, bizarrerie, incense. But the room was as matter-of-fact as her manner. Light, modern, with good color-harmonies, comfortable furniture.

Two tall french windows gave onto a balcony—the one from which Fred Moreno had launched himself in a swallow-dive the night before.

Her routine deposition to the police had read: "He'd been drinking rather heavily, and getting a little sentimental. When he asked me to marry him, I reminded him of my previous refusals and said that nothing

had changed, that I just wanted us to stay good friends. Suddenly he got up on the edge of the balcony. He was swaying a little, obviously drunk. I went forward to pull him back, but he got nearer the edge. He expected me to make a fuss, I guess, but I figured that would be the wrong thing to do. He might throw himself over for the sheer hell of it. So I turned back into the room, saying 'Don't be a fool. Come and get a drink.' When he didn't reply I looked around, and he'd gone."

Not even a farewell. Just a straight, silent dive away from her into oblivion.

"The way they questioned me," she said, "you'd think they suspected I heaved him over."

The idea had been barely formulated in my own mind. Her voice hit a raw nerve. "I don't know how you do it," I snapped, "but don't. Thoughts are private."

"About as private as my life is to the newspapers," she said, her lips curling. "You looked at the window when you came in, and your whole train of thought showed in your face."

Silvia—

*"... holy fair and wise is she
The heaven such grace did
lend her
That she might admired
be ..."*

Holy? And was that grace lent her by—heaven?

But perhaps Moreno was better off than that other poor devil in Westchester. He would sit for hours gazing at the padding on the walls of his cell, murmuring with every shade of tone, inflexion and changes of emphasis: "No Silvia. Oh, no, Silvia. Oh, Silvia, no," again and again, until his eyes widened in a great, mad stare: Then he would scream and turn and try to tear and kick his way through the wall, looking back over his shoulder . . .

Silvia said: "When you came in here, you were ready to be good and scared. Now you're merely irritated because I told you what you were thinking. That wasn't very difficult. If you want to think to yourself, put a mask on. Or maybe that *is* a mask you're wearing? You don't look like much of a newspaperman."

"How do you know I—" I stopped short as she began to laugh softly. I threw my hat aside and sat down.

"That's better," she said. "It was quite smart to send an angel-face boy fresh from college. But they don't know you very well. Or perhaps you don't know yourself? That's the best form of protection, brother."

"You talk in riddles," I said. "The complete farceuse."

"No, Just a working girl. Of course, if you want to play at being children, I'll slip off and put on something more suitable. Is that phrase corny enough for you? Help yourself to a drink."

Something in the back of my mind struggled for expression—or recognition—as she went into a bedroom with a swirl of negligee. I thrust it back out of focus. If she liked her conversation sprinkled with innuendo and slightly crazy—

Crazy as the fellow in Westchester Asylum—

But he didn't know—

Know what?

I poured myself a whiskey from a decanter. A book lay beside it. The *Satyricon* of Petronius. In the original. There were a number of marginal annotations. I knew they were in Silvia Thwaite's writing. Just a working girl, eh—with a working knowledge of Latin?

She had both increased and subtilized the obscene implications of one passage that caught my eye, by two or three simple elisions and additions in ink.

"Is this better, sonny boy?"

She was standing in the doorway. She was tall, with a surprising but not disproportionate length of tapered legs. Other

flesh was disposed to advantage. A lightly-bronzed sylph, her heavy golden hair loosened and carefully awry. She wore blouse, tailored briefs, bobby-socks.

A middle-aged man's dream of ripening, brazenly-innocent youth—except for the smoky-blue eyes. They were in startling, wicked contrast, for in them was the negation of all innocence.

A middle-aged man's dream . . . Paunchy, super-salesman Frensen had gone for that assumed aspect of her, that intriguing division of appeal between the bobby-socks and those eyes, the socks-evoking the paternal sugar-daddy, the eyes provoking the eternal male. But that didn't explain why hard-headed, unimaginative Frensen had driven his Cadillac over the edge of a five-hundred-foot canyon at such a speed that it had hit the opposite wall as it fell. He could have found other babies to give him more—or less—for his sugar. Men might die for love of a woman in old novels. But not in this busy day and selfish age. What had the coroner said? "No imputations have been made or can be made on the available evidence regarding your moral character; and no charge has been brought against you. But since this court is privileged, I say without hesitation that you are a dangerous

young woman and no asset to any community, and—" And at that point, her hot-faced young counsel, watching her interests, had made his indignant objection, which the coroner had regretfully sustained—against himself . . .

Silvia said: "When you've finished the inspection, kid, what do we play—pat-a-cake? Or have you—remembered—yet?"

The thing in the back of my mind that I could not—or dared not—remember made another bid to slide into consciousness. I thrust it back.

I finished my whiskey and got up.

"Going so soon?" She lifted a cigarette to her mouth. "You've only asked me one question, and that was an impertinence, besides being unnecessary. You haven't asked me about Moreno or Frensen or poor, mad Goodsell, or what really happened to that young lawyer who vanished after he had appeared for me in the Frensen enquiry." She came towards me, lithe, graceful. The blue of her eyes was even smokier, with a compelling luminosity. "You haven't asked me what I do to live, whether I've ever been married, where I was born. You haven't even asked the burning question—what I gained when those dreary fools

died, since none of them carried insurance in my favor."

She was near me, still smiling, still talking. My brain was ice-cold despite her nearness and incredible desirability. My youth was squirming away from me and leaving—something else.

Without looking, I was aware of every commonplace detail of the room, a light, dustless, modern apartment in Manhattan. A stray sunshaft slashed whiteness across a green wall. Traffic murmured in the street canyon below.

I was aware of the time: just before noon on a day that promised to be a New York scorcher. Aware of myself, a fledgling, fluttering reporter on one of his first assignments.

And aware that to all these mundane appearances, to this everyday atmosphere, to the sight, sound, odor and being of things, was opposed a monstrous perversion of normality, a sublime and wicked *otherness*, an anachronism that was made more deeply evil by its blinding contrast with modernity—and all in the shape of this slender, corn-haired girl.

"Just a business girl in the big city," she murmured, as though she had followed every vagrant pulse of thought.

My brain was becoming numb with the effort to keep a realiza-

tion buried deep in the subconscious.

Her fingers, long, tipped with dull rose, lifted, fluttered over my arm, trippingly sensuous.

"Strong fellow," she said. "You couldn't be afraid of me, poor unprotected me? Why don't you ask questions? Are you afraid I might answer?"

My arm involuntarily twitched from the contact. I'd lived clean. There were, suddenly, some things I didn't want to know—from Silvia. Yet.

I had enough for a story—description of the apartment, the physical enigma of the girl, changing her clothes, her attempts to mystify, her erudite transliteration of the *Satyricon*, her mind-reading act, description of her victims as "dreary fools"—oh, I had enough to satisfy Michaels, even though I'd barely said a dozen words myself.

Matter-of-factly, but without looking at her again, I said, "Thanks, Miss Thwaite. I don't think we'll get much further without wasting our time."

I grabbed my hat. She said nothing. But I knew she was smiling as she followed me into the tiny hallway.

Her presence was a warmth behind me. For a crazy second as my hand went to the latch, I was the poor mad devil in West-

chester Asylum who also felt a warmth behind him as he tried to claw his way through the cell wall . . .

Silvia Thwaite said quietly, almost in my ear, "A'zaar ch'ayumet axuud, che F'ta-tooth?"

I turned to face her, back to the door. Outside, I could hear the newspapermen, still there, still talking. They were a million miles away. Inside my mind was another door, beginning to open, and I was struggling to keep it closed against the thing that was struggling for entrance.

Her words had unlocked that door. I followed her back into the sunlit room, sat down.

She sat beside me. "Open your mind," she said. "You cannot struggle forever. It must come to you sooner or later, *brother*—in this life. And since you have chosen well—"

I leaned back. I felt tired. It seemed I had been prevailing too long against knowledge—all my conscious life, in fact.

The realities of the day faded as mental rapport was established.

The door in my mind opened, and Silvia walked in. She gave me possession of her memories, in vivid vision.

One of three thousand years

ago. A different name, a different face, of course—a face that in this memory bore a fresh livid scar from a burn, a scar that curved from one corner of her mouth to her ear like a wide, unholy, lopsided grin.

"Spoiled," came her thought petulantly. "The fool took fright—a *marechal-ferrant* he was, strong-thewed, shining-skinned, working in his Theban forge at night. He hurled a piece of white-hot metal at me, and muttered a prayer to one of his egregious gods." She fingered the scar and sighed. "How many births and growings must I suffer before I find another body so—suitable? I cannot bear disfigurement longer. I die now by my own hand to seek again an unborn."

The scarred beauty dislimned, wraithlike, appeared again many births later, dark-haired now, a Sicilian, gracious, olive-skinned but still, in spirit, Silvia. The prey—a young, straight-limbed farmer. He walked into the sea the second night after their marriage.

She remembered, then, a failure: how, as a new-born babe, destined to remain unconscious of its own nature until it reached maturity, she had been forced into recognition of herself by the unveiling eyes of a wise priest as she lay cradled in the

arms of her peasant father. When the priest exposed her, the father had cried, "But she is my child, and no changeling." And the priest had said, "No changeling, my son; nor is she possessed, for it was in the darkness of the womb that she became—another. It is not what she is now, but what she will become when she has grown to womanhood and permitted herself to realize the purpose of her unholy allurements. But see—she has awakened to her danger! Look at her eyes!" And the father had looked down in abhorrence, and despite her enraged but puny wailing hurled the girl-babe from him into a river.

Then came the Scots Laird who fell from the battlements of his castle—this time taking an auburn-haired, screaming Silvia with him.

The recollections from Silvia's mind to mine became a procession; halted here and there by the execrations and warnings of a priest or spirit-wise scholar who recognized her for what she was. But when the wisdom of men in such matters faded with the coming of a science that scorned superstition, she waxed strong.

And not alone. There were—are—many, in royal courts, in city alleys, in penthouses, in country hovels. "Dangerous

women." Laughable, blind meiosis that terms them such!

Through Silvia's mind I watched her last victim, Fred Moreno, dive from the balcony the night before.

"Understand, *brother?*" came her caressing mental whisper.

What had she taken from them—the Sicilian farmer, the Laird, Goodsell, Frensen, Moreno, that they should want to die? Their money, their health, their honor?

None of these things. She had taken something they might not even have known they possessed until her hell-born warmth had drawn it from them in the panting delirium of the moment; and they had calmed, looking at her mocking, cloudy-blue eyes, realized their loss, and killed themselves.

Money could be replaced, health built up, honor salvaged. But what this creature had taken left a void that could not be filled. Spirit, soul, call it what you will, this thing that makes even animal-living business-men so much more than mere animals, this precious thing, this succulent thing, this ambrosial, delicious, life-warming morsel . . .

Apart from anything else, its absorption relieved the sometimes tedious burden of immortality, for even during the years

of growing-up in a new body, when such creatures as Silvia occlude from themselves the knowledge of their potential nature, the vague memories of endless repetition disturb their dreams.

But, ah! thought Silvia, the delight when the body was ready for the old knowledge that was new again—the knowledge of how to ingest the morsel of soul!

The victims were not possessed. It was not a possession, but a deprivation—a drawing-forth.

Of how many had it been written, "He killed himself for love of a woman," when it was the self-imposed penalty for loving—a creature like Silvia?

For, of her kind, Silvia was greedy. She took all when she feasted thus, and her victims could not bear the torment of the emptiness that remained.

Others of her kind, wiser, more cautious, took less; and their victims might not feel impelled to kill themselves.

But even of these more lightly-treated victims, was it not often said by puzzled friends, "He's been a different man since she left him—kind of cold, soulless. Broke him up, I guess . . .?"

The old song came back with a fresh emphasis—

"Who is Sylvia,

What is she—?
Succubus!

I recalled the interview as I sat at Michaels' dinner-table. I had not told him—or written—the whole story at the time, nor did I now, when he said he was still puzzled about the case.

"Why did she wait until you were there to throw herself over the balcony?" he asked.

I laughed. "Maybe seeing my fresh innocence she realized at last what a bad girl she'd been."

I appeared to dismiss the subject as I resumed my conversation with Michaels' delectable seventeen-year-old daughter, Anne; but even as I drank in her anticipated beauties, I was remembering that final scene with Silvia.

Bad girl, Silvia! Intolerably bad. I shivered to think of it. So greedy.

So clumsy.

I had told her so as she was backing towards the window away from me, and out onto the balcony.

Her red mouth was open in a silent scream. She strained back against the parapet, a quivering

arc of bronze and white, dazzling in the hot sun of early afternoon.

As I finished what I had to tell her, I had pronounced certain words in our common tongue. Silvia thrust herself backwards and fell.

I watched with pleasure the flailing of her falling limbs, swiftly diminishing.

She was very fond of that body. For her foolishness, I hope she later picked on the body of a girl-babe destined to epilepsy.

But in any case, I trust that she will remember my injunction when she comes to womanhood again.

"The men you picked," I had pointed out, "were too—prominent. Your incontinent greed brought notoriety, and that is bad for business. Some scholar of the ancient lore might have divined your true nature. And you had the impudence to reveal me to myself before I was—ready. That was dangerous. As an incubus, I have a natural aversion to my female counterparts. Next time be more careful. And keep out of my way, *sister.*"

More Spinned Against

BY JOHN WYNDHAM

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

Lydia knew more about spiders than she liked. Edward collected the nasty things. She even knew about the original Arachne. But there were some things that have to be experienced to be appreciated fully.

One of the things about her husband that displeased Lydia Charters more as the years went by was the shape of him: another was his hobby. There were other¹ displeasures, of course, but it was these in particular that rankled her with a sense of failure.

True, he had been much the same shape when she had married him, but she had looked for improvement. She had envisioned the development, under her domestic influence, of a more handsome, suaver, better-filled type. Yet, after nearly twelve years of her care and feeding there was scarcely any demonstrable improvement. The torso, the main man, looked a little more solid, and the scales endorsed that it was so, but, unfortunately, this simply seemed to have the result of emphasizing the knobbly, gangling, loosely-hinged effect of the rest.

Once, in a mood of more than usual dissatisfaction, Lydia had taken a pair of his trousers, and measured them carefully. Inert, and empty, they seemed all right—long in the leg, naturally, but not abnormally so, and the usual width that people wore—but, put to use, they immediately achieved the effect of being too narrow and full of knobs, just as his sleeves did. After the failure of several ideas to soften this appearance, she had realized that she would have to put up with it. Reluctantly, she had told herself: "Well, I suppose it can't be helped. It must be just one of those things—like horsey women getting to look more like horses, I mean," and thereby managed a dig at the hobby, as well.

Hobbies are convenient in the child, but irritant in the adult; which is why women are careful never to have them, but simply to be interested in this or that.

It is perfectly natural for a woman—and Lydia was a comely demonstration of the art of being one—to take an interest in semi-precious and, when she can afford them, precious stones: Edward's hobby, on the other hand, was not really natural to anyone.

Lydia had known about the hobby before they were married, of course. No one could know Edward for long without being aware of the way his eyes hopefully roved the corners of any room he chanced to be in, or how, when he was out of doors, his attention would be suddenly snatched away from any matter in hand by the sight of a pile of dead leaves, or a piece of loose bark. It had been irritating at times, but she had not allowed it to weigh too much with her, since it would naturally wither from neglect later. For Lydia held the not uncommon opinion that though, of course, a married man should spend a certain amount of his time assuring an income, beyond that there ought to be only one interest in his life—from which it followed that the existence of any other must be slightly insulting to his wife, since everybody knows that a hobby is really just a form of sublimation.

The withering, however, had not taken place.

Disappointing as this was in itself, it would have been a lot more tolerable if Edward's hobby had been the collection of objects of standing—say, old prints, or first editions, or oriental pottery. That kind of thing could not only be displayed for envy, it had value; and the collector himself had status. But no one achieved the status of being any more than a crank for having even a very extensive collection of spiders.

Even over butterflies or moths, Lydia felt without actually putting the matter to the test, one could perhaps have summoned up the appearance of some enthusiasm. There was a kind of nature's-living-jewels line that one could take if they were nicely mounted. But for spiders—a lot of nasty, creepy-crawly, leggy horrors, all getting gradually more pallid in tubes of alcohol—she could find nothing to be said at all.

In the early days of their marriage Edward had tried to give her some of his own enthusiasm, and Lydia had listened as tactfully as possible to his explanations of the complicated lives, customs, and mating-habits of spiders, most of which seemed either disgusting, or very short on morals, or frequently both, and to his expatiations on the beauties of coloration and mark-



ing which her eye lacked the affection to detect. Luckily, however, it had gradually become apparent from some of her comments and questions that Edward was not awakening the sympathetic understanding he had hoped for, and when the attempt lapsed Lydia had been able to retreat gratefully to her former viewpoint from which all spiders were undesirable, and the dead only slightly less horrible than the living.

Realizing that frontal opposition to spiders would be poor tactics, she had attempted a quiet and painless weaning. It had taken her two or three years to appreciate that this was not going to work; after that, the spiders had settled down to being one of those bits of the rough that the wise take with the smooth and leave unmentioned except on those occasions of extreme provocation when the whole catalogue of one's dissatisfactions is reviewed.

Lydia entered Edward's spider-room about once a week, partly to tidy and dust it, and partly to enjoy detesting its inhabitants in a pleasantly masochistic fashion. This she could do on at least two levels. There was the kind of generalized satisfaction that anyone might feel in looking along the rows of test-

tubes that, at any rate, here were a whole lot of displeasing creepies that would creep no more. And then there was the more personal sense of compensation in the reflection that though they had to some extent succeeded in diverting a married man's attention from its only proper target, they had had to die to do it.

There was an astonishing number of test-tubes ranged in the racks along the walls; so many that at one time she had hopefully inquired whether there could be many more kinds of spiders. His first answer of five hundred and sixty in the British Isles had been quite encouraging, but then he had gone on to speak of twenty thousand or so different kinds in the world, not to mention the allied orders, whatever they might be, in a way that was depressing.

There were other things in the room besides the test-tubes: a shelf of reference books, a card-index, a table holding his carefully hooded microscope. There was also a long bench against one wall supporting a variety of bottles, packets of slides, boxes of new test-tubes, as well as a number of glass-topped boxes in which specimens were preserved for study alive before they went into the alcohol for his collection.

Lydia could never resist peeping into these condemned cells with a satisfaction which she would scarcely have cared to admit, or, indeed, even have felt in the case of other creatures, but somehow with spiders it just served them right for being spiders. As a rule there would be five or six of them in similar boxes, and it was with surprise one morning that she noticed a large bell-jar ranged neatly in the line. After she had done the rest of the dusting, curiosity took her over to the bench. It should, of course, have been much easier to observe the occupant of the bell-jar than those of the boxes, but in fact it was not, because the inside, for fully two-thirds of its height, was obscured by web. A web so thickly woven as to hide the occupant entirely from the sides. It hung in folds, almost like a drapery, and on examining it more closely, Lydia was impressed by the ingenuity of the work; it looked surprisingly like a set of Nottingham-lace curtains—though reduced greatly in scale, of course, and perhaps not quite in the top flight of design. Lydia went closer to look over the top edge of the web, and down upon the occupant. "Good gracious!" she said.

The spider, squatting in the

center of its web-screened circle, was quite the largest she had ever seen. She stared at it. She recalled that Edward had been in a state of some excitement the previous evening, but she had paid little attention except to tell him, as on several previous occasions, that she was much too busy to go and look at a horrible spider: she also recalled that he had been somewhat hurt about her lack of interest. Now, seeing the spider, she could understand that: she could even understand for once how it was possible to talk of a beautifully colored spider, for there could be no doubt at all that this specimen deserved a place in the nature's-living-jewels class.

The ground color was a pale-green with a darker stippling, which faded away towards the underside. Down the center of the back ran a pattern of blue arrowheads, bright in the center and merging almost into the green at the points. At either side of the abdomen were bracket-shaped squiggles of scarlet. Touches of the same scarlet showed at the joints of the green legs, and there were small markings of it, too, on the upper part of what Edward resoundingly called the cephalothorax, but which Lydia thought of as the part where the legs were fastened onto the body.

Lydia leaned closer. Strangely, the spider had not frozen into immobility in the usual spiderish manner. Its attention seemed to be wholly taken up by something held out between its front pair of legs, something that flashed as it moved. Lydia thought that the object was an aquamarine, cut and polished. As she moved her head to make sure, her shadow fell across the bell-jar. The spider stopped twiddling the stone, and froze. Presently, a small, muffled voice said:

"Hullo! Who are you?" with a slight foreign accent.

Lydia looked around. The room was as empty as before.

"No. Here!" said the muffled voice.

She looked down again at the jar, and saw the spider pointing to itself with its number two leg on the right.

"My name," said the voice, sociably, "is Arachne. What's yours?"

"Er—Lydia," said Lydia, uncertainly.

"Oh, dear! Why?" asked the voice.

Lydia felt a trifle nettled. "What do you mean, why?" she asked.

"Well, as I recall it, Lydia was sent to hell as a punishment for doing very nasty things to her

lover. I suppose you aren't given to—?"

"Certainly not," Lydia said, cutting the voice short.

"Oh," said the voice, doubtfully. "Still, they can't have given you the name for nothing. And, mind you, I never really blamed Lydia. Lovers, in my experience, usually deserve—" Lydia lost the rest as she looked around the room again, uncertainly.

"I don't understand," she said. "I mean, is it really—?"

"Oh, it's me, all right," said the spider. And to make sure, it indicated itself again, this time with the third leg on the left.

"But—but spiders can't—"

"Of course not. Not real spiders, but I'm Arachne—I told you that."

A hazy memory stirred at the back of Lydia's mind.

"You mean *the* Arachne?" she inquired.

"Did you ever hear of another?" the voice asked, coldly.

"I mean, the one who annoyed Athene—though I can't remember just how?" said Lydia.

"Certainly. I was technically a spinster, and Athene was jealous and—"

"I should have thought it would be the other way—oh, I see, you mean you spun?"

"That's what I said. I was *the* best spinner and weaver, and

when I won the all-Greece open competition and beat Athene she couldn't take it; she was so furiously jealous and so she turned me into a spider. It's very unfair to let gods and goddesses go in for competitions at all, I always say. They're spitefully bad losers, and then they go telling lies about you to justify the bad-tempered things they do in revenge. You've probably heard it differently?" the voice added, on a slightly challenging note.

"No, I think it was pretty much like that," Lydia told her, tactfully. "You must have been a spider a very long time now," she added.

"Yes, I suppose so, but you give up counting after a bit." The voice paused, then it went on: "I say, would you mind taking this glass thing off? It's stuffy in here; besides, I shouldn't have to shout."

Lydia hesitated.

"I never interfere with anything in this room. My husband gets so annoyed if I do."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid I shall run away. I'll give you my word on that, if you like."

But Lydia was still doubtful.

"You're in a pretty desperate position, you know," she said, with an involuntary glance at the alcohol bottle.

"Not really," said the voice

in a tone that suggested a shrug. "I've often been caught before. Something always turps up—it has to. That's one of the few advantages of having a really permanent curse on you. It makes it impossible for anything really fatal to happen."

Lydia looked around. The window was shut, the door, too, and the fireplace was blocked-up.

"Well, perhaps for a few minutes, if you promise," she allowed.

She lifted the jar, and put it down to one side. As she did so the curtains of web trailed out, and tore.

"Never mind about them. Phew! That's better," said the voice, still small, but now quite clear and distinct.

The spider did not move. It still held the aquamarine catching the light and shining, between its front legs.

On a sudden thought, Lydia leaned down, and looked at the stone more closely. She was relieved to see that it was not one of her own.

"Pretty, isn't it?" said Arachne. "Not really my color, though. I rather kill it, I think. One of the emeralds would have been more suitable—even though they were smaller."

"Where did you get it?" Lydia asked.

"Oh, a house just near here.

Next door but one, I think it was."

"Mrs. Ferris's—yes, of course, that would be one of hers."

"Possibly," agreed Arachne. "Anyway, it was in a cabinet with a lot of others, so I took it, and I was just coming through the hedge out of the garden, looking for a comfortable hole to enjoy it in, when I got caught. It was the stone shining that made him see me. A funny sort of man, rather like a spider himself, if he had had more legs."

Lydia said, somewhat coldly:

"He was smarter than you were."

"H'm," said Arachne, non-committally.

She laid the stone down, and started to move about, trailing several threads from her spinners. Lydia drew away a little. For a moment she watched Arachne who appeared to be engaged in a kind of doodling, then her eyes returned to the aquamarine.

"I have a little collection of stones myself. Not as good as Mrs. Ferris's, of course, but one or two nice ones amongst them," she remarked.

"Oh," said Arachne, absent-minded as she worked out her pattern.

"I—I should rather like a nice aquamarine," said Lydia. "Sup-

pose the door happened to have been left open just a little . . ."

"There!" said Arachne, with satisfaction. "Isn't that the prettiest doily you ever saw?"

She paused to admire her work.

Lydia looked at it, too. The pattern seemed to her to show a lack of subtlety, but she agreed tactfully. "It's delightful! Absolutely charming! I wish I could—I mean, I don't know how you do it."

"One has just a little talent, you know," said Arachne, with undeceiving modesty. "You were saying something?" she added.

Lydia repeated her remark.

"Not really worth my while," said Arachne. "I told you something *has* to happen, so why should I bother?"

She began to doodle again. Rapidly, though with a slightly abstracted air, she constructed another small lace mat suitable for the lower-income-bracket trade, and pondered over it for an admiring moment. Presently she said:

"Of course, if it were to be *made* worth my while . . ."

"I couldn't afford very much—" began Lydia, with caution.

"Not money," said Arachne. "What on earth would I do with money? But I am a bit overdue for a holiday."

"Holiday?" Lydia repeated, blankly.

"There's a sort of alleviation clause," Arachne explained. "Lots of good curses have them. It's often something like being uncursed by a prince's kiss—you know, something so improbable that it's a real outside chance, but gets the god a reputation for not being such a Shylock after all. Mine is that I'm allowed twenty-four hours holiday in the year—but I've scarcely ever had it." She paused, doodling an inch or two of lace edging. "You see," she added, "the difficult thing is to find someone willing to change places with me for even twenty-four hours."

"Er—yes, I can see it would be," said Lydia, detachedly.

Arachne put out one foreleg and spun the aquamarine round so that it glittered.

"Someone willing to change places," she repeated.

"Well—er I—er—I don't think—" Lydia tried.

"It's not at all difficult to get in and out of Mrs. Ferris's house—not when you're my size," Arachne observed.

Lydia looked at the aquamarine. It wasn't possible to stop having a mental picture of the other stones that were lying bedded on black velvet in Mrs. Ferris's cabinet.

"Suppose one got caught?" she suggested.

"One need not bother about that—except as an inconvenience. I should have to take over in twenty-four hours again, in any case," Arachne told her.

"Well—I don't know—" said Lydia, unwillingly.

Arachne spoke in a ruminative manner:

"I remember thinking how easy it would be to carry them out one by one, and hide them in a convenient hole," she said.

Lydia was never able to recall in detail the succeeding stages of the conversation, only that at some point where she was still intending to be tentative and hypothetical Arachne must have thought she was more definite. Anyway, one moment she was still standing beside the bench, and the next, it seemed, she was on it, and the thing had happened.

She didn't really feel any different, either. Six eyes did not seem any more difficult to manage than two, though everything looked exceedingly large, and the opposite wall very far away. The eight legs seemed capable of managing themselves without getting tangled, too.

"How do you?—Oh, I see," she said.

"Steady on," said a voice from

above. "That's more than enough for a pair of curtains you've wasted there. Take it gently, now. Always keep the word 'dainty' in mind. Yes, that's much better—a little finer still. That's it. You'll soon get the idea. Now all you have to do is walk over the edge, and let yourself down on it."

"Er—yes," said Lydia, dubiously. The edge of the bench seemed a long way from the floor.

The figure towering above turned as if to go, and then turned back on a thought that occurred to her.

"Oh, there's just one thing," she said. "About men."

"Men?" said Lydia.

"Well, male spiders. I mean, I don't want to come back and find that—"

"No, of course not," agreed Lydia. "I shall be pretty busy, I expect. And I don't—er—think I feel much interested in male spiders, as a matter of fact."

"Well, I don't know. There's this business of like calling to like."

"I think it sort of probably depends on how long you have been like," suggested Lydia.

"Good. Anyway, it's not very difficult. He'll only be about a sixteenth of your size, so you can easily brush him off. Or you can eat him, if you like."

"Eat him!" exclaimed Lydia. "Oh, yes, I remember my husband said something— No, I think I'll just brush him off, as you said."

"Just as you like. There's one thing about spiders, they're much better arranged to the female advantage. You don't have to go on being cumbered up with a useless male just because. You simply find a new one when you want him. It simplifies things a lot, really."

"I suppose so," said Lydia. "Still, in only twenty-four hours—"

"Quite," said Arachne. "Well, I'll be off. I mustn't waste my holiday. You'll find you'll be quite all right once you get the hang of it. Good-bye till tomorrow." And she went out, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Lydia practiced her spinning a little more until she could be sure of keeping a fairly even thread. Then she went to the edge of the bench. After a slight hesitation she let herself over. It turned out to be quite easy, really.

Indeed, the whole thing turned out to be far easier than she had expected. She found her way to Mrs. Ferris's drawing-room, where the door of the cabinet had been carelessly left unlatched, and selected a nice fire-

opal. There was no difficulty in discovering a small hole on the road side of the front bank in which the booty could be deposited for collection later. On the next trip she chose a small ruby; and the next time an excellently cut square zircon, and the operation settled down to an industrious routine which was interrupted by nothing more than the advances of a couple of male spiders who were easily bowled over with a flip of the front leg, and became discouraged.

By the late afternoon Lydia had accumulated quite a nice little hoard in the hole in the bank. She was in the act of adding a small topaz, and wondering whether she would make just one more trip, when a shadow fell across her. She froze quite still, looking up at a tall gangling form with knobby joints, which really did look surprisingly spidery from that angle.

"Well, I'm damned," said Edward's voice, speaking to itself. "Another of them! Two in two days. Most extraordinary."

Then, before Lydia could make up her mind what to do, a sudden darkness descended over her, and presently she found herself being joggled along in a box.

A few minutes later she was

under the bell-jar that she had lifted off Arachne, with Edward bending over her, looking partly annoyed at finding that his specimen had escaped, and partly elated that he had recaptured it.

After that, there didn't seem to be much to do but doodle a few lace curtains for privacy, in the way Arachne had. It was a consoling thought that the stones were safely cached away, and that any time after the next twelve or thirteen hours she would be able to collect them at her leisure . . .

No one came near the spider-room during the evening. Lydia could distinguish various domestic sounds taking place in more or less their usual succession, and culminating in two pairs of footfalls ascending the stairs. And but for physical handicaps, she might have frowned slightly at this point. The ethics of the situation were somewhat obscure. Was Arachne really entitled . . .? Oh, well, there was nothing one could do about it, anyway . . .

Presently the sound of movement ceased, and the house settled down for the night.

She had half-expected that Edward would look in to assure himself of her safety before he went to work in the morning. She remembered that he had

done so in the case of other and far less spectacular spiders, and she was a trifle piqued that when at last the door did open, it was simply to admit Arachne. She noticed, also, that Arachne had not succeeded in doing her hair with just that touch that suited Lydia's face.

Arachne gave a little yawn, and came across to the bench.

"Hullo," she said, lifting the jar, "had an interesting time?"

"Not this part of it," Lydia said. "Yesterday was very satisfactory, though. I hope you enjoyed your holiday."

"Yes," said Arachne. "Yes, I had a nice time—though it did somehow seem less of a change than I'd hoped." She looked at the watch on her wrist. "Well, time's nearly up. If I don't get back, I'll have that Athene on my tail. You ready?"

"Certainly," said Lydia, feeling more than ready.

"Well, here we are again," said Arachne's small voice. She stretched her legs in pairs, starting at the front, and working astern. Then she doodled a capital A in a debased Gothic

script to assure herself that her spinning faculties were unimpaired.

"You know," she said, "habit is a curious thing. I'm not sure that by now I'm not more comfortable like this, after all. Less inhibited, really."

She scuttered over to the side of the bench and let herself down, looking like a ball of brilliant feathers sinking to the floor. As she reached it, she unfolded her legs, and ran across to the open door. On the threshold she paused.

"Well, good-bye, and thanks a lot," she said. "I'm sorry about your husband. I'm afraid I rather forgot myself for the moment."

Then she scooted away down the passage as if she were a ball of colored wools blowing away in the draught.

"Good-bye," said Lydia, by no means sorry to see her go.

The intention of Arachne's parting remark was lost on her: in fact, she forgot it altogether until she discovered the collection of extraordinarily knobbly bones that someone had recently put in the dustbin.

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THE CRYSTAL BALL

As we go to press with this issue, the line-up of the next is fluctuating wildly. Don't be surprised if you don't find just what we're predicting. It seems that our crystal ball is out of the repair shop getting a new electron gun welded in. The focussing control got out of kilter, and the brightness fell way off. So we have to depend on guess-work.

If you don't see the yarns mentioned here, it will be because we decided something else had to come first. For instance, L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt are working on another Horold Sheo novel (guess where it will be laid). Meantime, we have one of de Camp's ancient-borboric-world-of-magic adventure stories that makes a nice, telling point about ancient magic. We've gotten behind ourselves and twisted our arm into writing a story we've been dying to write for some dozen years—THE SCHEME OF THINGS, by Lester del Rey; it's one of those stories which just might be why things are as they are, but we hope not!

They'll definitely be the last of the Conan stories by Robert E. Howard, as edited by de Camp—a name which seems to pop up often in fantasy. Howard left just three stories behind unpublished; two are already published, and this will be the end of the treasure.

We're also working on Poul Anderson, who is going to make more of a name for himself in fantasy than he did in science fiction, even. And there will be a number of new and comparatively new names. Apparently, fantasy writing is a labor of love, and those who write it usually turn out a really good job.

Whatever the line-up eventually is, you can be sure it will be the best we can obtain, and that it will not be confined to any type of story (outside of the field of fantasy itself as a type), since there seems to be absolutely no limit to the number of ideas of all types in the field.

And, incidentally, we aren't planning a lot of departments; we're trying to cram every available page with fiction, as you may have noticed.

What this means, of course, is that the best way of seeing what comes next is to make sure you watch your newsstand for our third issue. That way, how can you go wrong?



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**2010!** In **2011** adopted in 2010! **2012!** In **2013** adopted in 2012! **2014!** In **2015** adopted in 2014! **2016!** In **2017** adopted in 2016! **2018!** In **2019** adopted in 2018! **2020!** In **2021** adopted in 2020! **2022!** In **2023** adopted in 2022! **2024!** In **2025** adopted in 2024! **2026!** In **2027** adopted in 2026! **2028!** In **2029** adopted in 2028! **2030!** In **2031** adopted in 2030! **2032!** In **2033** adopted in 2032! **2034!** In **2035** adopted in 2034! **2036!** In **2037** adopted in 2036! **2038!** In **2039** adopted in 2038! **2040!** In **2041** adopted in 2040! **2042!** In **2043** adopted in 2042! **2044!** In **2045** adopted in 2044! **2046!** In **2047** adopted in 2046! **2048!** In **2049** adopted in 2048! **2050!** In **2051** adopted in 2050! **2052!** In **2053** adopted in 2052! **2054!** In **2055** adopted in 2054! **2056!** In **2057** adopted in 2056! **2058!** In **2059** adopted in 2058! **2060!** In **2061** adopted in 2060! 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**2114!** In **2115** adopted in 2114! **2116!** In **2117** adopted in 2116! **2118!** In **2119** adopted in 2118! **2120!** In **2121** adopted in 2120! **2122!** In **2123** adopted in 2122! **2124!** In **2125** adopted in 2124! **2126!** In **2127** adopted in 2126! **2128!** In **2129** adopted in 2128! **2130!** In **2131** adopted in 2130! **2132!** In **2133** adopted in 2132! **2134!** In **2135** adopted in 2134! **2136!** In **2137** adopted in 2136! **2138!** In **2139** adopted in 2138! **2140!** In **2141** adopted in 2140! **2142!** In **2143** adopted in 2142! **2144!** In **2145** adopted in 2144! **2146!** In **2147** adopted in 2146! **2148!** In **2149** adopted in 2148! **2150!** In **2151** adopted in 2150! **2152!** In **2153** adopted in 2152! **2154!** In **2155** adopted in 2154! **2156!** In **2157** adopted in 2156! **2158!** In **2159** adopted in 2158! **2160!** In **2161** adopted in 2160! **2162!** In **2163** adopted in 2162! **2164!** In **2165** adopted in 2164! **2166!** In **2167** adopted in 2166! **2168!** In **2169** adopted in 2168! **2170!** In **2171** adopted in 2170! **2172!** In **2173** adopted in 2172! **2174!** In **2175** adopted in 2174! **2176!** In **2177** adopted in 2176! **2178!** In **2179** adopted in 2178! **2180!** In **2181** adopted in 2180! **2182!** In **2183** adopted in 2182! **2184!** In **2185** adopted in 2184! **2186!** In **2187** adopted in 2186! **2188!** In **2189** adopted in 2188! **2190!** In **2191** adopted in 2190! **2192!** In **2193** adopted in 2192! **2194!** In **2195** adopted in 2194! **2196!** In **2197** adopted in 2196! **2198!** In **2199** adopted in 2198! **2200!** In **2201** adopted in 2200! **2202!** In **2203** adopted in 2202! **2204!** In **2205** adopted in 2204! **2206!** In **2207** adopted in 2206! **2208!** In **2209** adopted in 2208! **2210!** In **2211** adopted in 2210! **2212!** In **2213** adopted in 2212! **2214!** In **2215** adopted in 2214! **2216!** In **2217** adopted in 2216! 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